

METROSYNTH

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For Katharina Helter

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C1: INHALE

"Shouldn't he be the one making these decisions or has your head grown as cold as your heart."

"And yours is hot with his intoxication! Don't pretend you're being impartial or rational! He has gone rogue. He is a dangerous man, and if you will not help me find him then I will let him find you."

"You're inhuman! You would take me hostage?"

"I can think of no better bait. No. Then yes. You will come with me and should I find you were helping him, you will be made to suffer as penance."

"And him? His punishment? Will you be the judge of that now?"

"Not a judge, an executioner."

Gasp. "We have become murderers in a society without growth? There would be only one end!"

"There is only one end, but it is long past this day."

"And why, then, would we keep living in doom."

"Hope is a doom just as damning. Would you prefer ignorance instead? Bliss?"

Hangs head, defeat, impasse, writer's block.

"I don't know."

If she had hair, it would hang down. If she had a face, it would be covered by it.

"Is this my voice it sounds strange to me."

It is monotone, yet rhythmic, contiguous, even, comma-less, but not a question. A question would be: why are you talking to yourself? This hum of your voice is comforting, in a way, to a point. But where is it coming from? Why are you so distracted by its texture, an alien outlet on ... who? Yourself... Who is that?

If you had a nose, it would smell freezer burn. That is the sense you get. You clench your hand through grogginess in your head. Even the voice of your mental narrative has a foreign, far-away quality. It's so cold. Your fingers are sticks of frozen flesh until you look at them, if you had eyes. They are made of metal, steel points to a palm. If you could feel, they feel as skin to your own touch, with those fingertips.

You see steam. Stop. Completely stopped. Because there is no breathing. You do not have lungs, you do not have a nose or mouth, and you have no face. You are an imprint on this dream, this nightmare figure, and you do not know who you are.

"Where am I?"

Who are you asking these questions to? Yourself? That self that, sorry, who is a stranger to... what? Consciousness. You have returned from a long vacation just around the bend, and maybe that's it. You're around the bend, you're crazy.

We all are who talk to ourselves.

"Why is it so cold?"

The clues are many, seen with whatever you are seeing with. Walls of frozen everything, dark and blue, bluish, but that could just be the light coming from where your face should be. You feel that face and imagine someone strong, chiseled, handsome. Someone, one self who would be in control. It is a man's face so you are a man, but you already knew that. You imagine you felt hair. You have no hair. Are you bald? Perhaps it is inconsequential when you are unsure of everything else. You are adrift in a sea of confusion, a frozen sea, smooth waves as walls of ice, a deadend passage, a hallway that ends here and begins into the darkness as a fade. Any one thing known is better, no matter how small, than the confrontation with nothing. Stable reality is subject to as many of those as possible and the more we have tightly in our grip, the tighter our belief of what reality is. Questions soften and a lack of identity washes the whole thing away. At this point you might as well be dreaming. That thought might have crossed your mind, but a lack of lucidity precedes all else. Now only the answers to the immediate questions can build any sort of structure for you to get a handle on.

You have gotten up. You are standing. A rushing is now a ringing in your hearing, or your mind where that takes place, and only with that transition do you notice the prior state, your prior position too, at the dead end that you

are presently walking away from. Apparently, a man leaving a corridor in blackness and, at least, you can recall these minutes of confusion, of the conception of these conceptions, so that you do not stop or turn around. You are forming a goal, a reason to move forward, a motivation to this life.

"Am I alive or when I stop, am I dead?"

Misty puffs in your path, this passage is going nowhere. You do not see more than some feet ahead, a short distance you cover and repeat so that it unfolds rapidly without satisfaction. The roundabout ambling is dizzying, your face feels warm now and the brittle cold is held at bay; your fingers scrape the walls. *Am I touching them on purpose?*

Good, now you have the hang of speaking to one's self within one's own mind as a proper, sane, normal person would. *If I am moving too quickly then I may have missed something or I may walk into a trap of some kind.* And that's probably enough of what we need to hear.

Why would anyone want to trap you when you are already trapped. Escaping from a trap? You stand straighter still. You know you have nothing to fear but this emptiness, here and in your recollections, and it does make you uneasy. A rumbling rumble buffets the silence; the sound of a footstep in fresh snow magnified a hundred, no, a thousand fold. An almost rubbery noise, an icy squishing noise, a blanket rather than a

blade. It walks through the walls and you. If you had bones, it would rattle them in your fleshy cage. You have no flesh and no bones. Yet you know yourself to be... human.

This earth creaks and groans under the weight of your destiny, within the yolk of your free will and willingness to push forward or do absolutely nothing at all. It sighs, this earth sighs at your death, in relief; the burden of stress removed for natural process. Maybe. At a high enough level, everything appears to be natural, cyclical or at the very least, looping.

The old man leans against the wall, sits against it cross-legged, and lifts his head wearily to stare at your approach. His glowing eye vents seem gray. His gray body seems feeble, and his feeble face seems curious. Usually that would keep one young and so he is, as this metal, brushed and smooth, thing. Steam puffs as constantly as from a sewer grate; from a delicate grate where a mouth would be on an angular yet generally egg-shaped head, roundness created by flat planes with soft edges. Those eyes: cut and slanted rectangles pointed within and looking out. The soft glow is a wan purple, lavender, and his aura appears almost magenta encroached upon by your blue aura. Is this what you look like? Is he your mirror?

"Oh, you again, living and walking from a dead end. I should have known and I suppose I did but ... it is so easy to forget."

His voice once gravel now synthetically smoothed over, a paved yet bumpy road from a long life. He sounds nearly sad and those eyes dim slightly as though closing. His head tilts to the expression and you are seeing him as a tired elderly man. If he had clothes, they would be threadbare, brown, once regal and now resigned, once suave and now merely saved to reuse.

"Who are we?" Your tone hums a baritone.

He smiles wanly, or would if he had lips, cheeks. "You and I? Finally you ask me something real. What happened to your purpose that blinded you so?"

"My question first, then yours." Stern.

"Of course. Sir. Sir Brom, I am your humble servant...."

"Brom," you try the name on. "It sounds strange to me," but you like it all the same. It sounds especially good in your voice. "You are my servant?"

"Only an expression, sir, but also yes, we are all your servants."

"We? Who are we?" Didn't you already ask.

"We..." Your servant chuckles at it as if it were a joke, an inside joke, that you made. "We, us, them, they ... by definitions I could say almost anything. You and I are men and so then are the

rest people."

"Hmm." He regards you, it seems, with a twinkle, a merriment rimmed with exhaustion. "What does that mean?"

Here he laughs out right, a bumpy rhythmic shaking of his naked metal figure, scraping against the stone. Yes, this is stone and ice here! You gaze around, feeling more solid, and find yourself in a chamber, no longer a passage, pebbles on the floor, rougher sides, no longer just cold and ice, but cold and stone. You are still in a pool of darkness with indefinite edges and when your gaze swings back to him, he is staring at you, no longer shaking in mirth, but firing a serious stare directly in your eyes. Probing. Questioning. "I don't know what happened to my purpose. I... am lost."

"Well, you'll stay lost down here. Go up, find her, get your bearings."

"I never loved you. Not the way you wanted. But I'm still sad that it's over."

We never say that which is most honest, bare, raw, because it is the most hurtful. Even though honesty is prized, even if it's good, even if the pain could be good. If I were real, I would feel real pain. If I had said it, I would be a real man.

"I don't understand. You don't want me but you're jealous. You don't get to be jealous."

"Why?"

"You're a coward. You ran away from me then and you're still running. You are always running."

"I am not running. I couldn't stay."

"You deceived me."

"I never promised anything."

"Action is promise."

"Hope is not promise. You deceived yourself with hope."

"Well, I hope you learn to treat people better. Our hearts are fragile and you break them like they were nothing."

"I promise not to take them for granted."

"It's too late for that, just go."

Looking at you... I..." We never say that which is most honest, especially when it bears with it our own vulnerability.

"I miss you too."

"No! No, you don't get to take that from me too! I hope you're happy, I'm happy. I don't hate you, I just don't want you in my life. I wish you had never been in my life!"

A door slams, iron and stone. The barrier is cold. Nothing compared to the heat of the heart, of hateful loving passion. No, there was no door, not then. I can feel sad, but I never loved you.

Brom climbs the steps.

This is you going upwards above the man, the servant, the advice of the lesser, the lower, the advisor. One, two, ... three. Three. Am I counting steps? Four, five, six. If he had muscles, they would throb and sear. Six. It's been more than that, but we're counting from when we remember to, so it always starts over. The count begins at difficulty. Six, seven ... eight, nine. Nine. That is a lot, isn't it? Creaking and groaning go the knees, where all hurt comes from, at the joint, where there is turns and bends and snapping straight. If the heart is for intuitive love then the knees are implicit aching. May we feel what we lose.

Ten: a good count.

You look at your fingers.

"This is not the correct amount of fingers."

If you are missing one, and you are, then is it the index, the pinky, or something in between? If you've never had five then what are the four? But you have had five. You *should* have five, yet you cannot conceive of how to feel them individually to know which one is missing. They are all the same length, width, and size... impossible to distinguish. "At least," you muse, savoring the near-monotone baritone, "I have a thumb." One can never take the opposable for granted, even if it also is the same.

Another corridor at the top, walls wearing blue, stone hard surfaces draped in lacey ice. The stomach of this beast rumbles lazily. You, the parasite, slide along from the previous indistinguishable position to the next until the way breathes out into a massive cavity, edges unseen beneath the fuzzy curtain of blackness sucking on the specific to mold it indistinct. The floor reaches outward, flat and smooth, dusted by unique, beautiful snowflakes and drab chips off all the old blocks, the building blocks of the passage walls, the chamber it connects to, and possibly surrounding and containing all the world's emptiness even down here. Down below, as you still must be... isn't the ultimate ceiling a sky? The roof of the earth must not be this sticky, relentless dark.

"I'm either below it all, or above it."

"Who's there?" All voices come from nowhere when there is nothing to be seen. Scraping scuffle, a lazy walking sound brings to light, your sight, a very plain man with soft yellow eyes, alighting his momentum, lighting his way to you. It is disconcerting to see eyes alone in the darkness, growing large in closing proximity. If he had a real head, he would scratch it while giving you this dopey look on that expressionless face.

"It's me," you say. "Brom."

Those dull eyes go bright and then somewhat slim, narrowing it would seem in an overly weasel way.

"Of course, sir, I'm sorry." He did not sound sorry. "What are you doing up so late down here." He peered about and shifted his hands suspiciously, unsure how to execute his cunning. He is your enemy yet you do not know him. Is this dangerous? Anything is possible.

"I must see her." You do not know who she is, and this makes the man start, stopping his shifty movements as though he jumped in fright. "Where is she?" Your movement by contrast is molasses and you cut an imposing figure over one the same size as you.

"I..." he falters. "I don't know." He may. "No one knows." Never speak for everyone, but always speak for no one.

"Someone always knows." You don't know where you are. If she is lost then perhaps she does not either. You stop him from speaking by raising your hand and step closer, directly in front of him.

"Don't hurt me!" He squeals, too loud in this night. Drama. Amateur. Cry for help... play along.

"Don't make me." By contrast, quiet, slow.

You have no intention of hurting. How anyway would you do it to men of metal? Would his flesh feel as flesh to your fists? Would he feel pain in the thrashing? A bluff, but you know... you've hurt people before.

"Fish!" Odd, they don't swim well in

frozen water. "Fish would know, he knows everything!" Furtiveness more pronounced, wildness to the eyes. "He knows what you've done, what you will do!" Suddenly he shudders, staring aghast upwards, and your gaze is drawn swiftly to match.

Eyes stare down at you from a figure on a bridge above. Your eyes have adjusted. Has he -or she- been watching? They flicker away as the person looks away and dashes off, a shadow in shadows, an inky clot on a black vein. Bridges above, linking passages on the wall behind you to some tower structure off in the distance. It's all still just a bit too hard to see. You wish you had a face to squint. Does that even help? You can't remember, and he is gone. That stupid stooge scampered off while you were occupied. What will your enemy do?

A light dusting begins on your forward stride. Tiny snowflakes swirl fitfully down and turn to tiny drops on your hot face. The steam from your mouth is the ghost swarm of their melting. Sweat or tears that become butterfly clouds, illuminated by your eyes that spot the approaching tower. How is it snowing if you are not directly beneath the sky?

Pickaxes lean against the flat stone casing of the octagonal spire, sleds nearby with high sides, chunks of ore piled within. And within you move. There is no door on the wide doorway for this floor, which is probably the bottom. Does that make it the first floor, floor zero, or the basement? Shelves, hammers, forges, smelters, and statues glittering

with ice diamonds under the flood of your sight. Dark, dead, cold, put out. What fuel would run such things if such things had ever burned at all? You touch the edge of a bricked, blacksmith pit and bring that hand to your face. You feel greasy grime, cold wetness, and flesh. You feel your supple skin and slight stubble, none of which can be. Statues of people stare at you with hard, unseeing pupils in stiff sockets. Were you made here? Were you made? You approach one of these statues and touch its face. Rough, rock, pulled from the earth violently and violently carved to look like its last children. Your fingers leave a black, greasy smear that you rub between them. You still feel cold.

"Has it always been this way?"

If you had cheeks, you could pinch them, wake yourself from this dream. Real life is so slow, answerless and lonely. Alone. Aren't you supposed to go to her? Aren't you looking for her? That stooge, that man with banana yellow eyes, he said Fish would know, if anyone. The problem, if you have any such thing at this moment, is that you do not know where he is either.

"I knew this day would come."

"Then why did you wait for it?"

"Hope, naive hope, but I always knew you would leave me."

"I didn't know. I wish you would have told me. You doomed us from the start."

"And yet, you're the one's who's leaving."

"As you prophesied."

Tears, there would have been tears, choking, and words choked out through emotionally constricted throats, voices, thick with pain and tears. And relief.

"Oh this hurts so much, why did you do this to me?" She is still talking, still crying, but your eyes have ceased to flow, your heart has started to beat again, already. You hang on to the moment, to the pain, regret, remorse, guilt. Yet it's unnatural, it's not sticking, and those fingers of your consciousness stretch elusively. They find no holds. You are slipping away to relief.

Sobbing. "Oh, oh." Sounds that come out as words. They are not words except in a raw language, a primal vocabulary. Tears of tearing speaking dishonestly, directly, plainly, the veil of propriety torn off the shell, shrinking and shuddering under the attack. Defense of the defenseless. A flood to wash away the siege. Sorrows drowning themselves in

minutia, fighting within.

Prediction and fulfillment are not catharsis.

"I'm sorry." But you're not. "I'm going." You already left, back when she made the prophecy.

There are halls and stairs and doors in this eternity of exploration. Each floor mirrors the last, a package of rooms within outer steps spiraling straight and severe upward, connected to veins punctured by doors. Great doors. Big solid doors. Doors of dank iron. Icons and art and scrawl and maybe names imprinted on the surfaces of these portal guards, guarding utter mysteries. Even in the extreme of amnesic adventure you cannot bring yourself to violate the sanctity of a closed door, a stranger, prowler, uninvited. Are they storerooms, bedrooms, apartments, shops, something else? You do not know because you do not go in, you do not knock, you do not barge or query. You pass them by searching aimlessly and endlessly through this repetition.

Silence but for the clumping of your own footfalls thumping the stone with steel. You stop to look at your feet and the cloud you've been leaving behind catches up to you, obscuring your shoes, boots, what are those? There are no toes and you try to wriggle your toes; your feet shift slightly. If you had toes, they would be frigid, a chill that would infect the rest of you, as cold toes do. If you had lungs you would sigh, instead there is only a dim humming crackle of, whatever. It is a constant to your hearing and otherwise all is utterly quiet, so you begin to move again, scuffling your feet for no other reason than to make more noise, to not feel so alone. Then, an opening outward by the stairs, to a bridge into the snowy blackness. Snow that has become thick and swirling. The speckled flesh of that dark

emptiness, cutting visibility down to a snow globe of what's immediately before you. Is that the same bridge from earlier? You've gone around so much, you don't even know the direction you came from.

"We were all beautiful once."

"You're still beautiful to me."

"No, I'm the same to you, the same to everyone. We're all the same now. We're all ugly."

"That's not true, you're different."

Silence, staring, is that mocking, sneering, disbelief. "I don't believe you anymore."

"What? What are you saying?"

"I see the way you look at me sometimes."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Disappointed. I can see disappointment in your eyes."

Silence, now you are staring at her.

"Say something, please." Her tone, it began an arrow and the shaft has broken off.

"I don't know what to say, I..." More of nothing. You can't think with eyes locked like this. Her liquid pain freezes to a cold fury.

"You're not as deep as you think."

"I never tried to be."

"Yes you did. You always wanted to be different."

When you close your eyes you disappear.

"Brom, sir." A level voice whirs uncertainly behind you. Two men, two staffs, both topped by axe-heads at the top edges, two halberds, and four eyes of citrus orange cutting the intervening snow. A blue sheen lights their faces, blue gray. It is your sight on his skin, on this young man with peach fuzz tickling the air around his red cheeks. Well, if he had them, his metal is smooth that way or maybe it's something else. Maybe it's memories. They wait for you to speak; their posture implies they have something to say.

"What is it?" Of all the questions you could ask you knew they had no answer to any except this one. You felt it.

"Everyone has been looking for you." You would raise an eyebrow, if you had them.

You remain impassive in the uncomfortable interval.

"And, well, we are supposed to bring you to him."

"And the girl?"

"The girl, sir?" Shifting uncomfortably.

"Is the girl with him? Does he know where she is?"

"I... I suppose so, sir. So you'll come?"

He's lying. "No." That shocks them

expectedly. They grip their weapons with both nervous hands. "Leave before I hurt you." How? A bluff? At least it gives them pause, another shock.

"Please, sir, you must come with us."

"He is not going to listen, arrogant bastard." The second one's voice is childish insolence. A flash bang over empty smoke, a dangerous fearful one. He steps forward as you speak.

You must speak.

Say something. Do something!

Resolute gaze on him, on you, yours covers a pit, a large empty space. His is a pot lid over bubbling, over volatility. And you just stare. What are you doing? You are waiting for the right moment when he commits.

"No, wait!" the first shouts as the second thrusts, stabbing forward with his halberd. You turn but it hits your abdomen showering sparks, slicing skin, spilling blood. You grab the blade and yank it free of his grip. He stumbles with a clank and falls, flops onto the bridge.

You are standing on the bridge. They were in the doorway. When did that happen? The halberd's head opposes your own, behind yours, the shaft held expertly behind your body, left hand out, pointing palm to them, knees bent, bloodless ground, pock-marked by spark-melted snow, backing up smoothly, slowly,

carefully.

The one helps up the other; the one placating, and the other swearing. "We should go get help."

"Don't be stupid, he'll escape. We have to take him now."

"He has a weapon!"

"So do you!"

"Look what he did to you!"

"I wasn't ready, give me that."

They are studying your slow retreat. You don't want to hurt them. They seem so young. One shouldn't hurt children... but children should respect their elders. Is that what you are? Their elder?

"He's getting away!"

"Well don't just stand there, we have to follow him!"

"I'm not getting out on that bridge." Bulging eyes peek over the precipice. There are no railings. How long is this bridge? Where does it go? "You go get others, alert Fish."

"Okay, but what will you do?"

"Follow him, you dolt!"

"He's getting away!"

"You said that already, just get

going!"

Their voices fade, you can barely spot the glow of their eyes straining out over the bridge, one of which seems to curve in on itself and vanish.

When you close your eyes you disappear.

"Damn!" The brat swears and thudding footfalls follow. A quick step, you quick step backwards blindly. A balancing act, one of faith or insanity. You meld into the shadow and feel swallowed by a doorway passing your shoulders. There are the stairs on the periphery, same as the other side. So you go up, but you still cannot open your eyes. You're not sure where he is and he might see you seeing: there is no need to sense someone's sight upon you when it emits blatant light.

"I'll get you, bastard!" He's close. Up, down? Are you quiet enough?

If you had adrenaline it would be flooding your brain. You cannot feel your heart beating but you know its anxiety as your own. You think it and you own it. Now approaching the next level, you turn and open your eyes as you face down the passage. No time for shyness, you must find a place to hide! You try a door: it groans horribly.

"Ah ha!" The voice rushes for the stairs from the floor below and you rush up away from it. You're both rushing around, winding up the octagon. Round, flat, round, straight, up, up, around, up

along, up, up.... Dizziness hits you squarely!

You steady yourself against the slanting wall.

If you had a stomach, you'd vomit. A cloud eats up the air around your head, obscuring your sight.

You hear the steps continuing, albeit slower, but you can't run anymore. You feel unstable, a hollow nausea. A solid unconsciousness, too early for this short life, dabbles with your senses, now on your knees, hands to the floor, walls warping in.... There's no snow here. No storm. There never was. It is all outside or inside you. Strange thoughts fight for prevalence when your identity is in shreds, your memories missing, and lucidity hangs by a thread dipped in bile. Roiling, boiling, now your face is on that grainy floor. It should be cold, it feels cool to touch the flesh of your cheek, but the heat is from within, not without.

"I must... get away," you choke out against the floor stone, within your death cloud, the low-hanging fog that clings to your back, sucked underneath as you struggle to rise. Why is it so difficult for you? How does a metal body become winded? Where is your pursuer and is he troubled in the same way? You wish you could remember also, but it wouldn't actually help you now. Nothing can help you now. Running to save them will kill you. You don't know if that is weakness or strength, but you are not even strong

enough to pick yourself up.

You are going to be captured.

No, that one will not capture.

He will kill.

You are going to die.

Maybe, that first lunge did little to damage you, only sparks for blood, but what else can he do if you can do nothing. Where *is* he anyway, hasn't he the energy that you don't, what is he waiting for, what... is... this... on your hands?

"Blood."

Did you say something?

"Right, you're a nice mess. Come straight to my door, did you? Come to save yourself?"

You tilt your head up, slowly, to the voice.

"Yes, that's it, polite to look at who's talking to you." Odd accent: dry, sardonic.

"Help me, I cannot stand up."

"Cripes, you fell down at the right place, at the right time, except I'm closed. You closed me down. You never did approve of..."

"Now."

"Pardon? Are you just telling me, you can't..."

"N-now," your arms begin to shake.

He shrugs. "What Brom wants, Brom gets," he titters, dragging you beyond his doorway. "I guess I didn't have anything bloody better to do on a Tuesday night." The words pop and bubble softly on your fading senses. You feel yourself hefted upon a table, a raised surface. You want to ask him questions. Is there time?

"Where...?" It's so hard to focus, more to speak.

"Here, there, nowhere," he shrugs again shaking his head in what must be a soft chuckle. "You've been *stabbed*, old boy! Maybe 'where' isn't the best question starter, except..." Blooming pain, a mushroom cloud of light in your vision- "There! There's where you've been stabbed. Did you feel that?"

"Yes," you whisper hoarsely.

"What's the matter with you anyway, I mean besides the obvious flesh wound." He wipes his hands on a towel turning red at his touch. No, there is no cloth here, no blood, just a man, staring down while he gathers and organizes tools around you out of sight. "Last time you came here," speaking as he works. "Heh, you were all fire and Brom-stone." Chuckling.

"Am I going to die?"

"Ha ha!" He shakes with laughter, his aquamarine eyes seeming to narrow gaily. More mist floats lazily from the grid of holes where that mirth-marked mouth would be on a man. "No." ... Working...

"Not right... now, you mean?"

"Eh?" He stops, hovering over your inert head. "No, you're not going to die." It's not funny. He shakes his head again, this time in perplexity and... something else. Guilt? "None of us can die..." What a strange thing to say, to hear, and your other thoughts are arrested by this one concept. "Don't think about it," he advises, reading your mind, and doing something to your flesh that causes pressure, tightness, stinging — but no sharp pain.

"Then what are you doing?" He cannot save your life if you have none to lose. What is life without death?

"I'm patching you up."

What does that mean?

"You won't be all shiny and perfect, alright, but maybe you'll like it better that way. You always did want to be different."

"What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing."

"Are you mad at me?"

"No, don't be silly."

"Then what's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter, I'm fine."

"Okay, you don't have to snap at me."

There is nothing you can say to this or any of it for it to make sense, for it to follow a course of harmony. Unless. Unless you open up completely the torrent of your subconscious, let your under mind rant with a stream of consciousness ferocity and watch the flabbergast form into fear. Or you could pretend.

"I'm sorry honey, I'm just lost in thought."

"Then what are you thinking about?"

"I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know. I'm lost."

There are too many questions and only your one voice, the one output, the one input. Did you even have ears? Whatever this man did to patch you up is working. Your mental facilities return with a clear, precise confusion. You are as you were, in unknown territory.

"Who are you?"

"My, you are busted up about her aren't you?"

"You know where she is."

"Yes, I told you that already but then, you don't remember me so why would...." Rambling man.

"Stop." You sit up, spy rumpled metal stitches in your gut. "Answer me."

"Yes, *sir*," He drags the title out over a hot bed of sarcasm. "I'm Sid and she is with Fish, or I should say, Fish *has* her." He looks plaintive, this wrinkled, middle-age man of wispy hair and sallow skin. "I'm sorry," He lowers his eyes.

"Why?"

"It's best you don't remember."

Pounding on the door makes you both jolt, muffled voices hum through it, demanding your exit, to go with them. They know you're there. Sid looks to you quizzically.

"I must go." They cannot kill you.

Sid spreads his hands wide. "Then do what you must." He leaves off the honorary, the pejorative. He sighs instead and shakes his head. "The doors don't lock. I'm surprised they knocked. They still respect you, regardless of what you did."

"Or," You turn to him from the door. "They fear me."

"We have always feared you, Brom. You've made sure of that since the beginning."

"I don't feel sorry for you."

"Anymore?"

"Never. Didn't you ever listen to me?"

"Why are you with me then?"

"I like to hear myself speak."

"Then why do you need me?"

"Validation, I suppose."

"Do you want to hear what I think?"

"I only want you to agree with me."

"And your questions?"

"I always know how you'd answer."

Fury. "You never deserved my love."

Calculating. "The unworthy break the unwary."

Cold, smooth, rough, swirling, flakes, hallways, stairs, iron doors, and steely stares from haunting eye holes glowing orange with violent uncertainty. Two guards you know, and one new bridge that the three of you cross over, but all of this is in passing, in rote, buried beneath the blizzard in your brain that burns with a handful of variables and some stall-preventing constants, information in this ceaseless flow. Would it do any good to ask these cronies? No, it's best to meet the master.

BOOM! Two are nearly thrown off to invisible depths. One stumbles and grips the ground on hands and knees while the other topples backward hitting his head. "Ugh!" He says and his lights dim out. "Augh!" Screams back the scared one who hates these bridges; it is a screechy peak of sound that belies his seeming youth. Your assailant, shaking his head and groaning, swears with words best left unprinted... for now. The words of surprise, anger at the unchangeable, and predictable fear.

BOOM! This hazy pit of ice and stone gurgles and grumbles and shatters the quiet with ice shattering as glass, rock groaning and snapping as trunks of ancient trees, and the maw of the chasm trembles. These towers you stand between are pitiful teeth of a jaw that feels intent on slamming shut.

BOOM! You are standing, incredibly, legs in wide stance, peering curiously to the absence of a pounding heart. Crashing sounds assault you and the walls. Echoes bounce off each other in the crushing

cacophony. Chunks of things fall and break on other things, raining danger in rocks and blades of ice.

BOOM! Slipping into the void, that chaotic air, an imminent tumble amidst this inexplicable chaos of this tiny world coming apart at the seams. You flail out, limbs scraping the sides uselessly, toppling off the rail-less bridge, but... *SMACK!* A hand grabs your foot and hauls you back up, over, sliding on your stomach to rest. If you had lungs, your chest would be heaving. Empty metal husks have no adrenaline, but your mind manages panic.

The booming stopped. "I fucking hate these bridges!" Screams the one. Now is appropriate. You aren't in disagreement.

"What in hell was that?" The other guard pants, gathering himself shakily, lights flickering and not quite as bright. You turn over and rise yourself, not trusting the world to remain stable. Everyone looks at each other. No answers.

"Thanks," you say into the uncomfortable silence. They all turn to stare at you?

"What for?" Asks stab-happy suspiciously.

"For saving me..." As you say it, you know it is not true; none of these cowards would risk themselves for you. "Nevermind, we'd better go."

Weapons, halberds, are fingered and

they continue straining to see around, but they agree with hasty movements, that it's best to get off this bridge. At the end of it is an opening emitting a faint light that casts the figure at its entrance as a silhouette. Hands on hips, two red eyes, and a stern, furious countenance. He, he sneers at you. If he had lips, they'd be drawn up just so, under a sharp nose and rigid brows above flaring eyes and permanently flared nostrils. His strong, pointy chin reflects the permanent vertical wrinkle in his forehead, the stamp of a squinty glare well-practiced.

"How nice to see you again, Brom." He turns away before finishing the sentence and waves your entourage in with an irritated jerk of his hand.

"Should I say the same?" You're in a rather large, octagonal-walled, dome-ceiling room. He turns with scolding eyes unable to thaw.

"No, not unless you have what I want. You may go," He waves the guards away.

"Sir, but what was...?"

"Leave us!" His syrupy voice manages to growl. They slink out, shutting a door you had not noticed and a picture engraved on it. There have been images on all the doors. Did you only now notice? It is a ship with three masts, a beautiful woman at the bow, simple forms on deck, and all the rigging to knot it in a web. You imagine it is a marionette flying by some unseen hand, in those...

twinkling stars... or clouds. Both?

"I didn't find you to discuss art."

You pierce his eyes intently.

"Ah, usually you are the talkative one. Very well. Where is she?"

"What?" You gape at him stupidly.

"Don't play dumb, Brom. You were spotted breaking in here and stealing the White Dryad."

Swirling snow, swirling thoughts, but what have you been told? What do you believe? What would you like to?

"After our last chat I knew you'd try something like this. You think I'd just let you get away with it?" Blazing eyes, gesticulating hands. "I don't care if you were supposed to protect us. You forfeit that position. You've gone mad and I won't let you destroy us all. Now you must tell me where...."

"She was." A pause. Funny.

"She was here, where she belongs, where she must be returned. Whatever you've done, I know that earthquake had something to do with it."

"I don't... why do you call the White Dryad 'she'?"

"What's the matter with you?" He demands.

"He told me to find her. Another said you would know." His composure, a thin shell on fury, and you continue. "You are Fish."

"I damn well know who I am!" he yells. Frustrated. Reverberation. The walls hum with vibrations that sing a song of feedback over blown speakers. Benches rumble on the floor. An altar he stands before shakes and Fish stumbles, grabbing onto you for support. "What have you done?" He tries to scream but the waves of thrumming drown him out as though perfectly attuned to cancelling speech.

You imagine you read his lips, but he has none. A specific flower is carved into the altar at the base of a bowl that dips down as a dimple on its surface. It must be where she was. Fish knew. Brom in this moment almost remembers while you may not.

The air turns white, bright, a lightness perfectly attuned to cancelling sight. It smells like freezer burn and you feel warm. You know. You are going to die even if that is impossible.

C2: HOPE

"I love you."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course, I'm positive."

"Only fools are positive, especially in love."

"What are you saying? That I don't?"

"I'm just not sure you do."

"You're not happy?"

"No."

"And do y--"

"But I do love you."

Ouch. The light and warmth fade into a familiar dark and cold tunnel chiseled roughly from glacial meat. It feels like there is a tiny hole on the back of your skull that is at once itchy and then a stabbing, painful dot, a cruel grain of sand, a flea biting – whatever that is – that is a molecule of dark matter connected to hell. If you had teeth, you are gritting them. Your insides are yanked out as goopy thread through that miniscule hole in your head and stitched back in with rusty needles. You blink, blinking back the pain, blinking feels – yet you have no lids, the lights go out with nothing closing. Can you see without eyes that cannot close? You... remember using that.

"My voice" is still the same sonorous synthesization. Rumbles in the deep, creaking ice, aftershocks. You were just here. You started here. Thrown? No. None of this has made sense to you anyway and there are other questions to answer so you pick yourself up and leave with long strides.

"Déjà vu," The old man comments with a cackle from his cross-legged position on the floor.

"What happened...?" Do you know his name?

"Nothing," His eyes twinkle. "What did you expect?"

"I didn't expect that."

"That? Then it's not a wonder it

did."

"Who are you, old man?"

He blinks. "Has it been so long?" He touches his metal face. "I am an old man," He agrees sadly.

"What is your name?"

"Saga, sir. Fitting, don't you think?"

"No, none of this makes sense to me."

"I had hoped it would begin to. Oh well."

"Why are you down here?"

"Are you interrogating me too, sir?"

"How else shall I get information from you? Shouldn't I ask questions?"

"Only if you want those answers. But, I know you want to know more, know what's more important. That's why I told you the question instead. You're the answer..."

"Where is she?" You tilt your head.

"Yes, precisely, exactly, quite literally that one!"

You sigh. "He does not know."

"Do not be so blue, Brom." Pause. "Do you know why I am sitting here?"

You shake your head, no.

"Because I cannot walk, my legs are broken. You cannot sit here with me but not because your legs are not broken, no." He waggles a tender finger.

"Because my heart is broken?" Now why did you say that? Where did it come from?

He laughs whimsically. "Ah, that is good, but no, I'm telling you, you have no heart to break." He thumps his torso, a hollow sound. "Your mind." He taps the side of his head. "You broke your mind."

"How?"

Shrugs. "Probably with those plans?"

"What plans?" Exasperation.

"Plans, your plans, not mine! These answers will not help you. I will give you another question."

"No, I want answers!"

"Yes, yes, everyone does even though it makes no one happy. You need quieting to refill that hot noggin. Go explore Rimaye," He waves away the questions you are about to ask. "Open doors that are not yours. Find something else to search for."

"I wish you would just tell me..."

"Tell you what?"

"Anything? Everything! Give me

something useful."

Sigh. "You never did listen to me. You'd better leave, again; I can't help you. Advice is not a gift but a theft and yet I would use it to steal what you stole if I thought it would help. No, just go." He hangs his head and closes his eyes, the eye lights flick off, darkened windows. You are staring down, perturbed. He appears small and fragile although you must be made the same, identical size, equivalent sighs. You leave him at the bottom of the stairs.

The stones groan, you ascend hungry bowels, going against the flow. If you had a belly would you get hungry? You touch your belly and feel only the seal of steel stitches and melted metal molding of where Sid's fix sits. All else is smooth, flat surfaces like those of a well-cut gem. Your fingers trace the edges where folds of slinky micro-chain fibers enclose your elbows, your joints, your body parts. Are you a robot? Are you a man? Your legs do not burn with exertion yet you stand now at the level hallway, even floors of cut stones, precise shapes guide its length, its ceiling arches jaggedly. You are surrounded by eight sides in this wide, coffin-shaped passage. Did you notice before? No. Is it worth noticing now? You can linger on any detail infinitely and never come to its end, so what is it to ignore them entirely. You have things to do. A thing, a thing to find. Maybe your distance will give you a reprieve from Fish, from those guards, to search. You won't make the same mistakes again. You reach the end that yawns out into the

Chasm City, Rimaye, at night, a mouth of two bridge-strung teeth rising from an expansive, flat floor into the skyless heights. When will dawn come again? It is no longer snowing.

Quickly now, you dash into the first, closest tower, the smithy or craft-working room and back up to one of the eight walls when you hear footsteps.

"Who's there?" A dopey voice blooms from the scuffling and you spot soft yellow light before shutting off your sight. Invisible. Hopefully.

Steps stop suddenly and soft scraping follows in a botched attempt to step silently. "Mm. Hmm." You imagine sniffing from this dog, no this stupid man, you remember threatening him. Now you cower quietly behind bits and bobbles and the shoulders of impassive statues. "I really thought I heard something." See, everyone talks to themselves, especially when nervous. A regular gait resumes, outside and away from your building. You open your eyes. Eyeless beings return your eyeless gaze in thoughtful tones of blue.

"The ice is blue because everything I see is cast in that color, yet I can see other colors too." You mutter dangerously, the taste of your voice becoming accustomed to itself. The statues ponder your words studiously. They do not respond with them. If they had your light, would they? Are these art? You touch the face of one again, drawn to it. Yet your touch carries only earthen feel. Lifeless. You touch your

own face, chiseled but of flesh. This cannot be. You must find a mirror.

"I missed you."

"Where did you go? I missed you too."

"I had to investigate something. It's not important."

"So long, though?" She can tell you won't answer this as a question. Her head touches yours. You are both lifted, your minds rise in feeling, cut adrift on clouds. You close your eyes. "Tell me a story," she says breathily, breathless. Neither of you breathe but neither do you need to hold it. This heady feeling, your foreheads blooming with heat as she rests against you. You rest against her.

"I can't think of any." You cannot think. Is this all love is, not thinking? You feel happy, her proximity, you know she is happy too.

"Please." How much time has passed?

"I told you..." You're not angry, yet.

"I know, but you do. You just won't tell me."

You lie down with her, intertwined, nuzzling.

"Shhh." It doesn't matter. That's not important. This is. You're not thinking about this though, even though it could last forever.

A waterfall is stalled among the snowing but does it seem to you that the water would be falling up? It's difficult to tell, given that it's frozen and must have been for some time. Flakes fall down the rushing face of it, stretching as it does along the cavern between the octagonal towers. Those towers which spit bridges to each other and the chasm walls at arbitrary levels, to the point where you can't see. The air is clear yet stuffed with these flakes.

Brom left the statues in search of exploration, looking for a mirror, and you find a waterfall, a beard drooping from unseen heights, a rushing that you can touch. You stand on the frozen pond at its base. You put your hand on it. Does it feel like anything? No, just cold. The root of flow is a bulbous warp of water by your feel that strains upwards Yes definitely up, like the trunk of a tree. What is a tree? Your memory strains but produces nothing. No more except that keen nostalgic sense that this would be one made of ice. Your head shudders at the space in your recollection. So much room and so few things to fill it.

Your footsteps on the dark pond, like a bruise, leave clear traces snow is quickly filling, and covering over. If there were other footprints, they were made invisible by the time you looked down. Still, it seems you've been here before. A place of daydreams, the outfield of the caverns, and Saga did tell you to explore Rimaye, so that must include the suburbs. A water-wall in a snow globe, you edge along its refractive

surface, eye light manufacturing innumerable fractures of blue lights but too random, too chaotic for mirrors. Enough reflections cause a sparkling jewel but no image of your face. The drops, the foam, splashing, currents, and even a pebble here and there are all captured in an instant, motionless, soundless, painless. What a terror! Such torture is sublime.

Wait, what was that? You stop moving but it looked like someone or something was behind the... waterfall? No?

"My imagination? Hello, who's there?" You sense your own nervousness. This is too weird. You wait. No movement, no sight beyond this vertical river. Yet... more feeling along the surface probes out an opening to squeeze through. Droplets form and run hastily down the rippling ice as your warm face rubs against it. If your head was any hotter there would probably be a sizzling sound, too. But to you it just feels like ice on skin and itchy water, rain. Whatever that is.

And you're through, in a shallow alcove behind the warped wet glass, and there's no one there. No cave. More bare rock, somewhat isolated. Dirty, dusty, no signs of disturbance. Disappointment reigns briefly. The illusion of an answer shatters into the sand at your feet. Except. Looking down at those horrible inhuman feet you see something half-buried and... orange. Light-colored orange, a bright-faded orange, a worn color, somehow sweet in its wan-ness, a small sphere. You scoop it up and hold it in front of your eyes. The blue melts

foolishly off its candy surface, absorbed and bounced off this little ball. The dust melts through your fingers like a broken hourglass and a faded number appears in white. Six. Nine? No. You know it is a six. You turn it over, savoring the feel, the hard slippery casing, polished, pleasurable between your four fingers. Lost memories feel this way, you think. You almost remember but it is a peripheral recollection that slips away. Why did you forget?

BOOM! Great cracks run down the glassy heights.

BOOM! Sandy clouds of dust rise and fall, shaken free of their slumber.

BOOM! You stumble, to your knees, the orange ball, your fist-sized memory noted six, is tossed from your grasp to land with a rolling thud.

BOOM! Why is this happening again? A massive sheet is sheared free of the trunk and crashes outward, away from the alcove, outside, where suddenly you see, in ... in the iced waterfall, a face staring back at you. Not a metal face, not clearly made with eight sides, but almond-shaped, roundness, dimples, ... lips ...

You stand up and put your palms to the sides of this inverted visage staring out, imprinted in the ice with fine detail. You hear a muffled cry in the distance and synthetic shouting, clattering, distant, too far away to care, beyond the snow, beyond your side,

beyond this perfect mask. Right here. How, why? You tenderly run your fingers along its edges. It has none. Its surfaces, they feel soft, almost...

Brom presses his face into the mask and feels the water melt and steam and fall like tears streaming down his cheeks. If he had cheeks. He sinks into the indentation, molding its features to his own in a slow blur. And through it, through his eyes and this ice, through the mist and light, you see yourself, beyond the warped thoughts through this warped looking glass, a man facing you then a synthetic being, from flesh to steel in the ripples and dribbles of cold water burning off your face, broken off the mask. No, this cannot be. You see that he, that you, are outside looking in and you are the man but he is... a robot? Sapphire eyes, windows to an ocean of time, gaze back at you through the fall that slips away from your searing crown.

The hiss becomes a hum, a great hum, an awesome thrumming that drowns your own pitiful motoring in a frozen, leaking waterfall, losing sight of yourself. You pull back, cool, wet, dripping, but getting warmer. It is all getting warmer and you cannot move your limbs, sluggish, can't see where you went, whiteness that is not snow, pervading all, inevitable, swallowing, like the blackness you see when you close your eyes. And you close your eyes yet all you see is light...

C3: IMMERSION

"Hey, where are you going?"

*You don't know but you can't stay here.
"Back to the beginning." She doesn't
understand but then again neither do you.*

"Do you need to get away from me?"

Yes. "No, of course not."

"Then where is this beginning? Whose?"

*"Ours. All of us. Everyone." Sweeping
gestures cast grandness to cover up the
grandness of your guilt. "Something has
been found, down below. I must go, I must
figure out who I am. Who we are."*

"Are you going alone?"

*You hesitate then shake your head.
"No."*

"Ah, will it take long?"

"I don't know, probably not." You hope so.

She waits for something that doesn't happen and then speaks it. "Will you miss me? Even a little?"

No. "Yes, of course."

Your mouth is dry, throat scratchy with arid cold. Something is wrong. Your forehead is lava, your vision swims but the water drains from it and the plump, boat-rocking passage becomes the same stable tunnel you came from; that you keep coming from. Go on, stand up, and move along, you know the drill. Exit this colon of the earth's bowels into that chamber again. The old man who gave you questions is still there. But where are you?

"I saw myself." Saga looks up at you and somber pale lavender beams illuminate your shadow. "We are not human. I am not a man. This is wrong."

"Incredible," he murmurs thoughtfully, distantly, far-off gazing, then shudders and returns his attention to you who waits somewhat impatiently, feeling rather off, ill, if a machine can. "Not yet, perhaps," he says.

Is he answering your statement?

"I'm glad you saw and I am surprised you remember. I have always enjoyed this moment and never this soon."

"Stop."

He cocks his head.

"Enough nonsense, I want answers."

He sighs.

"Real answers."

"Very well, maybe you are ready."

"I was ready before."

"No, you had to see before you could listen. That's how it's always been."

"No more riddles!" You shout. "What am I? What are we if not... people? Robots?" The word itself leaves a metallic taste on your tongue. He spots your confusion.

"This time is short. Ask your physiological questions of one and existential to the other."

"But..."

"You will understand, in time." He overrides you. "In time, hmm." He chuckles. "Myself, I am the only one who knows when we are now and now you will too." He pauses. "Again." He continues and you fight down the urge to shake straight answers out. "We are the Youngest Dryas, the Children of Stargrazer, and our fate has been bent but not broken. You must fix this mistake. Our doom, that you are realizing, is endless repetition of this blasted night, a short daze and an infinite nightmare... for me."

"I am stuck in a loop?" Comical, if it wasn't horrifying.

"You all are."

"But you are not?"

"No. And I've had much, much time to contemplate this. But you have to leave soon so I will just say this. The loop cannot be broken. It must be completed."

"Why?"

"It is inevitable. Call it your destiny."

"How do you know?"

"Because I have seen you try, sir, and I have witnessed your crushing disappointment when you could not break it."

"No, how do you know it is my destiny?"

"You were the first of us to awaken, our Father, and you were the one to remember when everyone forgot. I believe you are our only hope to fulfill the Holocene Prophecy and do our ancestors proud." He laughs again. "At least, I would be proud. I am so tired. But, ironically, we are out of time. So go find your answers. Use the right questions that I know you know."

You are about to ask him why you can't stay but you realize it is the wrong question. No answer will satisfy. So you bow this head, feeling slightly leaden, burdened by this knowledge set upon a vacuum of past, and carry yourself heavily up the stairs.

Your thighs do not burn with each step, but you feel like your weight is

more than your legs are used to and more exertion is required. You do not get tired. You are not human. You have none of the biology that you feel, that you imagine. Fantasy? Madness? What are you filled with? Treats? Funny. You touch the scar where Sid patched you up. Yes, he can answer these immediate questions. You feel you must know, despite Saga's insistence about prophecy and doom. Does one have delusions of grandeur? He must be the mad one. Yes, you must know the stuff you are made of. Distant grumbles throughout the ground punctuate the thought, consensus with your surroundings that bloom into the dark cavern. It has been a long night and a short daze. Could he be telling the truth?

"Who's there?"

Oh no, not this again. You stride smoothly up to the stooge. "What is your name?"

"Brom, sir! You know I..."

"What...", you repeat, closing the distance. If he had a neck you would be breathing down it. Also, if he were shorter, as he seems, and not the same height, as he is. "...is your name?" you finish to this trembling little man.

"Sheraga, sir."

"I thought so." Did you? He gasps, looks up and your eyes follow inadvertently, crossing his eye-light, milky lemon yellow. Above you, looking down, is a distant figure high up on one

of those dangerous, flat-topped bridges, stretching across sinuous arches like arms to shoulders. Blue? Are those eyes glowing blue? But before you can really tell, the person rushes off across the bridge and returning to your level, the enemy has left. You know how this is going to go. He will never be any more help than this.

Brom enters the base of the tower, the workroom filled with faces of people, real people, in permanent petrified form. Is this the shape, no, are *these* the shapes of things to come or only distant memory, myth, monsters of legend. You do not know but you do not either know that you were, or will be, one of them — and that you currently are not.

Up the tower stairs to closed rooms and empty hallways, pictures on iron and rough floor stones, then an outer opening. The bridge. Is it the same one you saw from below? Yes, you believe so. Where does it lead? Peering out your vision becomes suddenly obscured by tiny flakes of snow, appearing as if by magic. Yet before that you think you see an opening in the chasm wall briefly illuminated by green, before going dark.

"Brom, sir." A youthful voice driven by mechanical precision, humanly inflected. You turn to face the two guards and see two young men, hardly old enough to be called men, more like boys, one shooting his look to you nervously and the other haughtily. Oh this is starting to make horrible, terrifying sense.

"What is it?" A test.

"Everyone has been looking for you." Is this enough to confirm the situation? Is there any truth to an axiom, how much proof of any rule is enough to predict the future outcomes? Just because anything has happened in one way, does it mean the same will happen again? "And, well..."

"You are supposed to bring me to him." You smile in morbid amusement. They roll their shoulders and flex their weapon grips nervously. Do they think this is a sign of your rebellion, your resistance? "And I will go." They visibly relax though the second continues to glare. "What are your names?" You must organize these characters by some label if you are to plan around them, to use them.

"Serik," the first says shakily.

"Serak," the second says angrily.

Two pairs, four orange eye-lights illumine your face, the fluttering snow. They stand in the doorway. You are backed out onto the bridge. You don't remember having stepped onto it. Brothers? If there is such a thing in this place...

"Tell Fish I am coming."

"You must come with us," Serik insists.

"No, I will go alone. Later."

"We can't allow you out of our sight," Serak hisses, firmly squeezing the halberd handle.

"What are you doing?" Rising pitch.

"The bastard's going to get away if I don't stop him."

"Son," you say, deadly calm, stopping their prattling. "Move aside. Return to your boss, I give you my word that is where I'm heading, after I pay Sid a visit." Before they finish processing that, as they roll it around in their heads, you rush forward, grabbing their pikes, one in each hand and jerking the weapons backwards. Serik releases his in a fright but Serak hangs on so you kick him in the chest.

"Augh," the grunt sounds strange in that synthetic tone. He topples onto the stairs, rolling down them in a crash. Serik flees upward. You toss the axe head arms over the edge into the heavy, fog-like snow and pass inside, through the first fortress and into the second citadel.

"We will never be the same again, will we?"

"No. There is only one direction, but it is better this way."

"How can it be better if there is no choice?"

"I chose to stay didn't I?"

"Did I have no say in this?"

"Would you change that? If you really wanted to go back, would you?"

"To do it all over again? Yes, why not."

"You'd change things, even if you lost this, even if you had no knowledge of it?"

"No, I wouldn't want that, not if it could be different."

"I would do it again, too. I mean, we still ended up together. It might not be perfect, but there is love."

"No. Yes there is, but I wouldn't do it at all again. I would have made a different choice altogether."

"And now?"

"Now... I wish that I didn't love you. Sometimes I hate you for that."

A door with a tree on fire. Sprinkles of ash speckle the background and sides beneath and beside the spread boughs, etched in frigid iron. The image stares at Brom who gives it a brief, acknowledging look before shoving it open.

"Hello, Sid."

"Brom?" Exclamation breaks the accent briefly before it falls back into its tannin-laden drawl. "Okay, this is unexpected." Interesting, he doesn't recall your previous visit. "What's this then?" He points to the welded scar on your stomach.

"You don't recognize your handiwork, doctor?"

"Mine? Doctor? But you forbade..."

"I've come to continue our last conversation."

He pales, draws his pointing hand back and straightens. "I already told you once."

"Maybe more than once, but continue. Tell me again." You lean into intimidation.

"Now, now, I'll tell you, alright. Ahem, sir, I mean. Fish has her. Safely I might add and I did nothing to harm her. I only wanted to understand. It is the only way. She is the only hope for our salvation, evolution, or whatever you want to call it." Babbling. He sighs,

"And I missed her. You do too, I can tell."

"Fish does not have her and in spite of his accusations, neither do I."

"Eh? That's impossible!" Frightened and unlike him.

"Why?" Advance a step, almost two.

"Because, uh, I don't know alright!" He splutters.

"Because you lost her," you state. He reacts with a scared and sad expression. "Again." You add intuitively. He wilts, his face drooping and his shoulders slumping.

"How... I do not know. I was going to return her but we weren't finished."

"Perhaps you forgot. Sometimes," you put a paternal hand on his back. "I am afraid that when I fall asleep I will forget everything." Is it possible to recall a fear of forgetfulness before all else? As you speak you are looking down. He is looking at you.

"You won't."

What kind of footprints are those in the dust? "How do you know?"

He inhales deeply, chest unmoving, steadying himself. "We are not human."

You laugh just as deeply, chest uncontrolled, trembling yourself. Direct

confirmation. "Yes, isn't that obvious?"

"Is it?" He seems confused, but continues. "I think we are still men, synthetic men. Synths. There are moments when I think we could be more. Or... used to be more."

"You see flesh, feel flesh, smell..."

"Organic," he nods slowly, smoothly. "You too? I shouldn't be surprised since you were the first. Anyway, we get close to amnesia but it never overtakes us."

"Explain."

"Our..." he gropes for a word, "...design is flawed. It probably was not meant to be. We all know the duty of our stewardship, but there is nothing to say why we overheat or why we need sleep to cool down."

"Our heads?" You touch your... face. Hot.

He taps his twice in assent. "Fiery noggins. If we weren't in a glacial crevasse then we'd probably never be awake. In fact, I think..." He pauses. "What I'm about to say is about our past which is heretical since we are bent only to the future."

"There is no future left," you say without thinking then wave your hand dismissively. "Tell me."

"Well, if this wasn't always cold then we'd hibernate right through it. Our

life energy may be tenacious, even immortal, but it is not invulnerable. After long enough we might forget everything and then what are we?"

"Empty."

"Maybe so, but the function of many things are in their emptiness. This room would fail at its purpose if it weren't. No, I'm more concerned that what we were told," He pauses again, "...is all made-up. All lies." His look is pointed.

"What I told you, you mean?"

"You." He agrees. "And Fish."

"You think we *used* to really be human and these sensations, these visions..."

"I hope," he says, "there is a difference. I hope these are not hallucinations of our damaged minds. We can't know how we operate."

"Why not?"

"It is not for us to know."

"You believe that?"

Sid shrugs. "The Children of Science give us the Elders of Faith."

"What are you quoting?"

"You."

"Always it comes back to me."

"That's what you wanted."

"Well now I am lost to myself." You turn to go.

"Where are you going?"

"To see Fish. Learn Brom from him also."

"He is dangerous." He doesn't tell you to be careful. The statement is odd, the way is lit by bluish hues. You leave through the open door that he closes behind you.

"I love you."

"What does that mean?"

"I never want to give you up."

"Because then you'd be giving up?"

"It means I don't want to lose you."

"That's all?" The vacuum of space has more air than this room, and it's warmer too. "What if you're not going to lose me?"

"Then I promise to spend the rest of my life with you." It feels so good to declare.

"Love is a promise?" She eyes you hurt, malicious. "We cannot die and forever is unimaginable. You really want to be with me that long?"

"I never want to be apart." It feels so good, a blanket, a shield, a bubble.

"Be careful what you wish."

"It is my oath, not my wish."

"Then so much more dangerous..." she sighs. "Hell will break open with your promises. I want more, but I cannot have it from you."

"I'll keep you close, I will protect you, I will give you anything you wish for." It feels good, cozy, safe, true.

She melts in your arms. Pop!

How long has it been? The depths of your mind and the pondering stretch minutes over seconds or the loop itself is not in fixed iteration. There are no clocks, no clockwork, no gears, no mirrors, just halls and doors, ice and snow, and questions, the infinite color within behind your blue eyes.

"BROM!" Orange eyes, Serik by the sound of it, coming down the stairs to meet you. Sounds below alert you to the others. Other. Serak probably. Were they brothers? Was there such a thing among us... synths?

"Coming, boy, as I said."

They have new weapons; one is above, one below.

"Don't try anything, bastard!" Serak growls from down the stairs, menacing you with his new halberd. Or he retrieved the old one from the Chasm City floor below. You are unarmed but also immortal, unafraid, only... impatient to patch these holes in your mind, drink in knowledge. Drink? Eat? More unnecessary vestiges of the past, or cravings for the future. You shake your head slightly, the feeling of sand in a bag, heavy, laden, so much to find, too much to carry. They take this movement to be a gesture of acquiescence but are untrusting of it.

"Do not touch me, boy." You indicate the proximity of his blade to your scar. You do not flinch, but he does. He would raise his eyebrows and clench his teeth in repressive, adolescent aggression but

you move stately upwards, giving your captivity willingly in order to move, to the end, as swiftly as possible. Although, maybe it would be quicker to just...

BOOM! Damn it all! You begin to run, pushing Serik aside as he fights for balance; physical and mental control over the shaking and the fear accompanying it.

BOOM! You race through the anthill of gravestones.

BOOM! One more and if Saga is true then only a short interval before the next iteration.

BOOM! Steeling limbs to pump smoothly, you bring Brom across the bridge to the temple, to the octagonal dome, to the man who knows what you wish to know.

"Brom." His eyes burn with the intensity of lasers, fury out-weighting nerves. "What have..."

"Fish," you interrupt him, "tell me quick, what is the Holocene Prophecy?"

He blazes with distrust yet, "You know it. It is written."

"Where is it written? There are no books!"

"Engraved on the walls."

"Where?" Quickly, it feels right to ask, but it is cold, hard, a block as

stubborn as your memories.

"The Chamber of Artifacts." Narrowing eyes.

"Not here?"

"No," surprised. You are not. "This is our temple. The Chamber is below the city where you - where we all - awoke."

"Show me." Is there time?

"I can't."

"You won't."

"No, I wouldn't." He smiles viciously. "But I can't. It was buried in a collapse."

"Why not dig it out?"

"To what end? That was so long ago and as you have championed, and I preached, we are not concerned with history. For we know our future, our destiny, and we never forget anything. Until now it seems."

"Yes, I have forgotten much but soon I do not think it will matter."

"Then you have not abandoned your mad plan to destroy us? I had hoped that would be the main thing you forgot."

"I did, I must have already set it into motion. Maybe it was inevitable."

"Ha." Mirthless. "The man who went

wild with free will now embraces destiny?"

"I didn't say that. I don't know what to believe and as I said, it doesn't matter whether I do or not."

"Why?"

"You will never know." This is wasting time.

"You're stalling." His scrutiny pulses with discontent.

"Because I don't have time to tell you and you'd soon forget if I did."

He laughs. "As you? No." He doesn't understand. "Your arrogance is truly your undoing. You were always unworthy to lead us. You may have been our father," he eviscerates the word. "But your prize for first to awake will be first imprisoning, not to mention first murder." But you are immortal... right? "You will have plenty of time to rant and rot."

But you cannot rot... right? You touch your scar involuntarily. "And you call me arrogant? You cannot stop me, because I cannot stop this."

"Tell me, sir. Have you forgotten her?"

"Yes."

"I have not. I never forget. But you *should* not. That is one obsession I'm sad to see broken."

"What are you saying?"

Fish sighs theatrically. "And her death..." His words are cut off by powerful vibrations that ruffle the temple walls into sheets of dust, turning his voice to a barely audible murmur.

"No wait!" You yell pitifully. "How does a frozen flower die?" What?

What is he saying? "What's happening? The prophecy, it cannot be! Why now?" It's useless, fearful drivel.

"Answer me! Who is the White Dryad?"

"Dead! Lost. All is lost." All is lost to white, not blinding but clean, powerful, intangible, all senses turn off. Pause. She was... more than a flower?

C4: FAIRDREAMERS

"I'm sorry."

"You're sorry, what? That this doesn't turn out as you wanted? I'm sorry, too. I'm sorry this turned out exactly as you wanted. You made this start. Now you make this stop."

"I don't want this to stop."

"It's too late. You already had your chance."

"I was wrong. I didn't know how to handle this. You know how restless I am."

"No, that is a cop out. I was ready to move on. I had moved forward and you pulled me right back. I was wrong, too. I was wrong to let you when I knew deep down this would happen!"

"It's not too late. We haven't had our time. I won't let it end!"

"Never. Forever. Ever What does it matter? What did you think? That you could fix this? Us? You... me?"

Tears. There should be tears to coat this shameful frustration.

"What can I do to make this better?"

"There! You admit it. Why must you do anything? As if I'm broken! Maybe this is just over, an end. Of course this is your fault! Is that what you want to hear? I won't let you revel in your suffering. This is not your salvation!"

Tirade. Inevitability. If you say nothing, if you say something, if you... There is no "if" that will change the flow, alter the condition, and lead this somewhere else. But oh, you want that so badly. And you know as you've always known, that if you want deeply enough then...

"I don't know if I can forgive you."

"I don't want you to..."

"Don't say..."

"I don't want you to do anything you don't want to do."

"And, and what do you want?"

"You."

"What do you really want?"

*"You." In this moment it must be true.
Embrace. "I want you forever, like this."*

*Tears. "This doesn't mean I forgive
you."*

*"I... okay." You don't know... don't say
it.*

*"Just stay, don't talk." You obey. "Why
do you feel so good?" Don't stop. "It's
killing me."*

Who is she?

Who was she?

As consciousness returns, it is assailed by the black hole memory of a woman, a flower, the White Dryad. There are no images to bear or bare but an emotional strain remains to rise and lash you with stomach-lurching melancholy, a bittersweet void of unremembered nostalgia. If you had a stomach, this aching is more than the worst ache of that. It is aching that cannot be fulfilled: a hollow craving that is beyond your body's capability and behind your brain's disability. Your hand has moved across your stomach, legs, metal hips, and blank crotch.

I suppose it is still a crotch, even unadorned. It is just that part of you between your legs, below the belly, and, well, you have a notion of what belongs there but if you dwell on it - no, you clamor up, leaning against the uneven tunnel, this horrible bedchamber that you can't escape from. Of course you haven't been sleeping, yet you are awake now, again, picking up these pieces that lead to a puzzle of complications. Women. Complications. They're the same thing only in that you let them complicate you, otherwise you'd be a very simple person.

Rumbles in the deep echo the dissatisfaction within your steely chassis. Purple lights raise up to meet your blues, but do they seem more gray?

"Hello Saga, does it seem longer

since I last saw you?"

"Whoever said time is rational?" Familiar chuckling. "We might think that of ourselves, too, yet seeing and hearing you, repeating this adventure. No, I believe it is intuitive, maybe even emotional. I think time may be a meta being with a personality, not only a pattern, of its own."

As his only audience, you will hear everything he wants to say except for the material tossed at the walls. You are eager for something less philosophical, more concrete.

"Fish told me the Chamber of Artifacts contains the entire prophecy in writing."

"Well, that is the way you came but you cannot go back now."

"And if I do?"

"No, no, no, you must only go forward. There is something else for your current attention."

"I learned nothing else," you lament.

"And what will you do now with this nothing?"

"Do you have a suggestion?"

"Yes ... you must feel a pull..." He looks expectant.

"I... I do. I want to know who she is."

"Then that is what you will discover."

"More talk? This is giving me a headache."

"There are other methods."

Such as? You remain impassive. Saga chuckles again and shakes his head before looking back into your eyes. "You could," he says plainly, "simply let yourself remember her."

"Let myself? I have been *trying* to remember and now I hunger for it like food."

"And how has that worked for you?"

"Everything is still blank and my head really does hurt. And now, now I hunger for a woman I do not know. Who she was...."

"Yes, her. She was always the key."

"More riddles, bah! What was her name?"

"Obviously you of any of us would be most interested in names, but she never had one."

"But why not?"

"Because you never gave her one. It was before you gave us names."

"I named you?"

"You named us all. That is what a father does."

"What happened to her then? Why did Fish say she is a flower when she is dead."

"She was and she is."

"I don't understand."

"You called her the White Dryad only too late, or in a moment of enlightened inspiration, but anyway too late for her to accept it."

"A name would have saved her?"

"Maybe. All things arbitrary are given a reason in retrospect. Hindsight is reverse prophecy."

"How did she die? Sid said we could not die."

"Then perhaps he is the one you need to ask."

"And you won't tell me?"

"No, sir. I believe you should go direct."

"I can't even look at you."

Yet she cuts you down with glinting eyes.

"I'm so angry my eyes must be red."

You read them, although it's unnecessary. They are rimmed with red and puffy. If you had eyes.

"You are pathetic, you are not a real man. How could you give me any time when you can't even stand yourself."

None of these are questions, not really.

"You convinced me with serpentine words, everything you said poison, and then cast me aside once you sunk your fangs in."

If you had fangs hers would be the larger right now.

"You struck me down when I bared my neck, when I opened myself to you. After I have given you everything."

Where do the metaphors come from?

"I'd rather you had actually poisoned me. No, stabbed me in the face, faced me like a real man."

You are not a man but right now neither is she a woman, rather she is a banshee, a terrifying spirit, a foundation of love consumed in tectonic vengeance.

"You are weak. You have no courage, no backbone."

None of us do.

"You are a worm. A nasty slithering creature!"

If we had voices, hers would be hoarse. She swings and slashes, digging not for points but wounding indiscriminately, spraying bile, playing to maim, shooting to kill, firing on all cannons, the cornered prey polymorphs into the berserker.

You are breaking. The canyon runs through your head, the pressure excruciating. You squirm but you cannot cry, you have no tear ducts, you cower but you cannot flee. Every moment was made to disappear, why won't this one?

So what now? It is a walk over the coals of love, passion, hate, the fuel spilled and explosive, napalm for the soul. Nobody can win. And you want me to say I'm sorry, because you're wanting to understand, and I am. But I won't. What does she want from you if not that? Why don't you want her? You can't even answer that, and there is no apology befitting the occasion.

"I hate you."

There it is.

"I hope someday you will have your heart broken like this."

I'm trying to remember all such hurtful things said to me because they were said to you.

"Say something! What do you have to say for yourself? Don't just sit there sniveling! You are not fit to lead, you can't even handle yourself. You need serious help! Look how you fall apart and I'm the one you broke yourself against! All your fancy words, all that philosophy. I am not impressed. What has it got you? Here? Is this what you wanted? Was this your grand intention all along? Are you enjoying this? Why won't you say something!"

I don't remember anything.

"I hope you're happy."

The rocky stomach of earth grumbles hungrily, wanting to swallow itself, digest you as you ascend the carved steps, now becoming irritatingly familiar. The walls that ran on mysteriously and endlessly now repeat in routine fashion, the perfected polygonal passages uninteresting. Not even the recognition of this habitual hallway piques your interest, because you have only one target in mind, one goal, one core dissatisfaction. Indigestible by your mental facilities, their acid failing flat, turning to harmless milk, frothy surf on indestructible living coral. You're so wrapped up in the impenetrable memories of her that Brom nearly collides with Sheraga.

"Who's there?" He repeats his standard greeting.

"It's me, can't you tell?"

"No, sir, I am still blind." Has he always been? Immortality does not come without sickness.

"A night watchman unable to see?" What irony is this? Another paradoxical puzzle piece.

"Everyone is looking for you, sir."

"I know this."

"But I am only the candle. I did not expect to find you myself." He casts about in his weasel way. What does he look at? His shifty yellow eye-light is pale and that paleness is a cataract on

his vision.

"Can you see nothing?"

"You are but a blur that moves, sir."

"And my eyes?"

"I'm told they are blue, but..." He gasps, looking up and you do not follow his gaze, instead focusing on him looking. Is this a trick on you? Do you have time for this distraction? So he is the streetlighter, the spotlight the dogs may follow to find you. What of his other senses then, or does a problem with one affect all? More questions for Sid... if there's time, after her. He scurries off into one of the two towers, the further one. You follow, but you are not following him.

These octagonal structures appear identical in size from what you can gather of exploring them and what little you can see through the heavy darkness of night. Before entering the base room you look up and for a moment think you are a figure on a higher bridge moving into this same tower, but it's moving so quickly, it cannot be... be what? Be human? You chuckle to yourself. Ridiculous to still think of yourself that way when what you see is obviously something else. You hope you are not crazy for crisscrossed visions and feelings of humanity.

You're up the stairs before taking notice of the bottom floor. Snowflakes trickle in from openings for bridges,

tickling your face. If you had eyelashes, then that is what they would feel like on your skin, if you had skin. What did she feel like? Was her hard shell an illusion to deceive your eye-light? Did she rise warmly to your touch with supple flesh and a fresh fragrance? The frustration of contending realities must have been unbearable. It is nearly so just to think about. What could two synths even do for consummation?

This passage. All passages architected identically, crafted with careful precision. Yet there is one here you will see again. Doors of iron with pictographic etchings, printed with some significance. There is a shadowy figure with horns, empty glaring eyes, hoofs, and a tail. Another is a lithe, feminine form with head tilted up, feet together, slight curves at the waist, and palms out, arms straight parallel to her sides. A fire burning an upside down flower. Flower.... A flower with eight petals. *Dryas octopetala*. The hollow point bullet of her memory fires impotently at the wall of your consciousness. You push open the door. It shrieks and obeys revealing a blackened interior, silent but for the humming of your head that sings a tune of longing in the thoughts coursing through its inorganic excitement. If you had adrenaline, you'd be filled with all of it at once.

Standing in the middle, empty, nothing here. She is not here. It's just another dead end and you cannot remain facing a blank wall in a random room that only happens to be adorned with a door bearing a flower. Suddenly your shadow

slides up to this dark wall outlining your silhouette in oceanic illumination. You spin around reflexively, virtual adrenaline kicking the clutch and flipping your mental gears from melancholic reflection to defensive action.

Angel! She is all you see, firstly. And blinded by the lantern of this visage, that terrible winged figure raises a flaming sword and brings it down on you. Your forearm splits and peels off, hardly attached by sizzling metallic strings bleeding stars, pumping sparks, gurgling smoke, grounding your brain in the immediate danger of mortal survival. You stumble back and grasp your torn left with your right arm. The shock blooms into pain and fog fills the room from the wound, blessedly leaving your mind. The divine messenger is coming down with another blow but you duck forward and dodge underneath. Now briefly behind it, you launch yourself into your winged assailant sending you both crashing to the floor.

"Oof!" The now dimming sword clatters to the floor and skitters to the wall. You roll sideways and come to your feet as the attacking angel struggles to its footing, the wings folded yet awkwardly...donned. It is clear to you now in this interval they are mechanical, strapped on, and worn by a synth with cyan or aquamarine glowing fearsomely through the mask of an exceptionally, beautiful woman's face.

"Sid?"

He tosses off the mask revealing the full fire of his furtive rage. A cloud previously trapped beneath encircles his head. He is panting, this stringy man, if he had lungs. He lunges at you with arms outstretched, his four-fingered hands splayed like claws and an animalistic sound escaping his mouth vent.

You knee him where his gut would be and it has the desired effect of doubling him over giving you a moment to wind back and smash an uppercut into his face using your good fist. The other dangles from a shredded stump, spewing blood. No, there isn't blood. Not quite. He flies backwards into the wall and face-plants forward onto the floor in a mess of noise.

"Cease this!"

The ghost limb is feeling numb. That can't be good.

Sid's response is to grab the sword next to him and rise with it, with menacing stare, lop-sided wings slipping off him from the impact. He unhooks the rib-like contraption and they crash to the floor in a racket.

"I will kill you too," his dry voice ominous. "Father."

We're waiting on a heartbeat that never comes. Yet it is lodged in your throat blocking any hope of explanation. The measure of distance to that heart might be infinite despite her proximity.

"I know you're beautiful. I can see it with my own eyes and hear it from the others."

"By giving me up, you're afraid someone else will take me then. Are you afraid of losing?"

"You are more than a conquest."

"And I am a conquest as well?" It isn't really a question, is there any such things as questions? They are responses. Reactions that lead to more of the same, revolving around so-called answers that are also questions. And not.

"I don't know how to say this."

She glowers at you, but waits anyway. The world trembles in anticipation. A keystone beneath the surface has dislodged, the core is unstable. You want to shiver but it would bring down an avalanche.

"I know I need this, but I don't want it right now."

"You mean you don't want me."

"Sometimes," it begins with a softener that will have no effect for what comes next, "I do not want to be with you." And then. "At all."

"I see." Does she? What if she does?
"So what do you want to do? Be with me
'sometimes'?"

"I don't know. Can't we take some time
apart to think about this?" Run away.

"No, I have no time to give you. If
this is your choice then what do I get?
After your free will I have no say. If
you do this, then we aren't anything."

"What has gotten into you?" But before you finish this he is upon you brandishing the now-dark blade. His swings are rash and risky, untamed and untrained, while yourself you find to be nimble and able. You twist your body, shift your feet, and within the dance of combat the edge never cuts you again.

"There isn't..." you grunt, "...time for this nonsense!"

Swish, swish, CLANG! He overcompensates, smacking the blade into the floor stone and a burst of sparks celebrates the contact where you stood only an instant ago. You kick the hilt from his hand.

"Augh!" He stumbles but remains standing. You can see now he is wearing flashy boots that add significant balance and are spattered with exposed circuitry and LED's. He swings madly, again and again, with clenched fists. You block, again, dodge, let his arm over-reach again, and then hit him squarely in the face, hard. His eye-light blinks, he sways in his boots, and crumples to the ground, dimming as he goes down.

If this is a repeating cycle, how could he react so differently, so violently compared to the calming therapeutic attitude before? Something must have changed. This room? He's certainly equipped fantastically. You pick up the sword. These must be the artifacts, or some of them. They look nothing like the craftsmanship you've seen. You put on the boots after yanking

them off Sid's limp body. They fit perfectly.

Strange, were they designed for synths' legs? As you lean down to examine them further you spot the mask and all other thoughts or curiosities flee from its presence in your mind. It steps in and speaks softly to something within, something you forgot, someone you forgot. But she has not forgotten or forgiven. I forgive but I forget.

You hold the slender face tenderly in your one hand, sword forgotten at your feet. It is not her, but she is exquisite. A soft pink coloring, she blushes pale at your touch. Dark red, near purple lips parted only a bit, fine lines in them, so lifelike. Where eyes would peer back there are holes above and to the sides of a small, delicate nose beneath dark brows that look like real hairs but... no. It feels of porcelain, all of it, though it must be made of something far tougher and very old. You can sense its age. And then you remember where you last saw this face... imprinted in the frozen waterfall.

You turn it around and raise it to your face. Your polygonal eyes do not quite fit the slots for sight but your octahedral face is about the right size for it to rest fairly comfortably. In fact, it attaches as if held in by a string but none exists. It merely holds of its own accord. It doesn't feel magnetized. What is it holding to? As it sticks there, you feel your head heating up quicker, a clump of growing pressure that makes you wish you had ears to pop.

It feels thick and muggy. Your equilibrium submits to a nauseous dizziness, small puffs of mist escape through the lips.

"Sir?" Serik's shrill voice pierces the moment.

You flip around and he winces. You pull off the mask and released fog pours out of your mouth grate as if in exhalation. Serak appears in the doorway next to his brother as you pick up the sword.

"Now boys," you say standing up straight and turning towards their nervous battle stance. "Stay back and I won't hurt you."

"We can take the bastard," Serak says, staring you in the eyes with a twitchy, malicious flicker.

"Sir, we must... ask you to come with us." Serik says pleadingly, trying to ignore his sibling's intent.

"I know," you nod. You stalk towards them. "But I will go of my own accord."

Misty substance oozes from your wound. That shoulder prickles. Your other arm wields the sword expertly, slow, fluid, balancing. That shoulder rolls with your gait.

"He's going to escape, the coward!" They back up involuntarily into the hallway, halberds held distrustfully, eagerly, and awkwardly.

"Please sir, drop the Sunblade."

The boots leave massive footprints in the dust of the floor, the snowflakes on the hallway flagstones, and they leave no sound. Your legs tense with spongy energy, ready to jump or run or more. The guards eye your wound, the artifacts, and the steely resolution of your expression, flitting from one aspect to the next, trained only on you. You're not thinking about them and Brom moves slowly, instinctively, and so does time.

You don't know how long it would take to wake Sid or if it is even possible, but Fish would know too. Fish knew. He always did. Kill her? She was... murdered? By Sid? Your surgeon, that dry-humored spindly man was a murderer? We rarely reflect who we really are.

Woozy irritation. Cloudy agitation. Then anger. Now rage. How dare he. And then try to kill you as well! How many attempts has he made? He lied and he lies unconscious, the rumpled body you leave behind holding the target of your frustration, if any of you could be said to be conscious at all. Ever. He could just be inert, lifeless, as a robot is not truly alive. Was it murder between machines? Did it matter if inorganic things massacred one another? If nature called that natural among her beasts then was it also a rule with outlier abominations? With the sudden loss and these thought paths you must have ventured countless times before, you feel loathing for your kind - whatever we are. And especially these whelps portending to do their duty, to contain you.

If they had goose bumps, they would also be in a cold sweat. As they are, bits or boys, they are merely cold and all else you see or smell is ethereal and ephemeral.

Yet the memory you have is not mechanical. It retains a feeling, an emotional core, like the stretching of time to cover a hole. The pit itself, the emptiness, has a unique impression, almost a personality which is the ghost of her in you that you will not give up.

"I said..." you say.

"Yearg!" Serak unleashes a hasty roar and charges at you. This one will never learn and if time were not circuitous he would not live long. How has he lived to now? You will never know and you don't care.

His head bounces off the slanting walls and rolls off down the stairs, marking the steps it doesn't skip with a scuffling scraping, marching percussion and the orange eye-light throws back dancing shadows of you and his horrified brother before it retreats completely, or goes out. You cannot tell. His body collapses to its knees and topples forward, pulled that way by his weapon held in a rigor mortis grip. Creeping fog escapes the stump of his neck.

"Serak!" Serik howls. "Why Father?" It is inflected as a question but it isn't a real question.

This one surprises you with his

dexterity and skill. The halberd spins and stabs with dizzying finesse, and you are forced out, out onto a bridge, past the door depicting the tree, out where the sparks of contacting jabs mingle with the dark snow and rain down into the black maw below.

He breaks through your defensive parrying and assaults you mercilessly. You grunt as the jabs strike your chest. As the edge saws against your side. As his halberd rips into your leg. Brief noises in searing pain. In a storm of his screaming, he slaughters, and you fall backwards, feeling the sting of his attacks everywhere on your body, imagining blood spray, red and gruesome, splashing and steaming.

And yet you hold the sword. And yet there is no new blood. And yet despite the brutish force, you are unharmed. You roll backward and up onto your feet. And quickly checking yourself, find absolutely no actual harm done except scuffs and scrapes. If you had brows they would show your shock, and his. He cannot hurt you with that. But *this...* The realization turns mutual. He isn't as dumb as his brother. One or two glances at your relentless grip and he makes his decision. He runs away. Self-preservation within his weeping prevails over revenge.

"BROM!" A voice booms from above, faint red light in the distant heights. You spring upwards at an angle without hesitation. It feels like flying and it nearly is. The leap takes you far up the wall which you strike feet first and push off in a flash, scaling this way, back

and forth only a few times until flying above Fish, over, and landing heavily on the bridge between the temple and his amazement.

BOOM! Perfect timing. He flinches at your landing but you know the sound is something else, something yet unrevealed. But for the moment it is audible intimidation speaking.

"Fish!" *BOOM!* Beats of music to the tune of crags and stalactites crashing, ice sheets rending, shattering like glass. The chaotic orchestra of everything crumbling into ruin.

"Father?" *BOOM!* Fear in his red eyes. They look bloodshot, tired, scared. They watch the city you both built and led, sway as loose teeth without a brace, gums turning to water, saliva is snow, built upon a blanket not bedrock.

"It's time." *BOOM!* Time already after so long. But the noise will stop. The band so pumped must wait for the maestro once more.

"T-time?" He glances somewhat wildly around. You wait a tick. No more booming punctuation. It is time, again, time and time again. Narrowing eyes return to you from titmouse to electric eel, regaining an unsettling composure.

"Don't worry," you say. "This won't take long."

"By the sword... this is how you will end us?"

"Isn't it how you ended her?"

"What nonsense! Have you lost your mind?"

Maybe. Confusion peers in, numbness and prickling, and confusion. Dwindling rage, dwindled by confusion.

"You had the White Dryad here in your temple."

"And you stole her! Is it because you thought..."

"Sid tried to kill me as he killed her."

"How fitting, completing the circle, like son like father."

Your head is an hourglass. The sand pours out of your arm. What is this? What is his meaning? "What are you saying? *He* killed her, not me."

"Is this what you convinced yourself." It's not a question. "Has your freedom suddenly sprouted insanity and morals?" His lips split into a sinister grin. "And you always implied *I* was cruel." That smile, cruel enjoyment. "Now you see the opposite is true." We always reflect our insides upside down to the outside.

The waxy malice melts into wariness as the chasm walls hum a drowning tune. The time for talking is once again at an end far too soon.

"What are you talking about? What did I do? Tell me!" His fear overwhelms him. Comatose, shaking him does no good, blank stare, evil and desperation drain into dumbness. The sword drops into darkness.

Rimaye, the cracking, crackling city fades to white.

C5: MORAVEC

Why is it that sadness doesn't make a sound?

You don't want her around. You lie next to her. You lie. Her eyes shut tight, her breathing soft and steady, your eyes shining on the ceiling, your head hot with unspoken thought, and everything you lose in wanting. You hate yourself. How awful is the strain of silent shame.

"You're awake?" Forests bloom in green light upon your rolling waves of blue. Thump, thump, thump, if you had a heart, this crystalline stillness still more painful.

This isn't living, pinched between a rock and a hard place and even this room is stone.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Obviously. "No." Yes, what's the matter with you?

"This isn't the first time."

"I don't remember the first time, but I think I'll survive." But will she? You don't give her enough credit.

"There's something you're not telling me."

"No, nothing."

Yes. Everything. Is there anything you're going to miss? You're leaving her now, as you should be.

Subdued rumbling in the rime abyss, the earth heaves in suspiration. You stay sitting, you put your head between your hands. It smells like a grease fire. If you had crocodile tears would they be made of gasoline? You taste blood, chewed lip, chewed cheek, clenched teeth. None of these things exist but your hands. Your hands You stare at them, both of them, intact, flexing your fingers. Two arms, two hands, eight fingers, eight figures ... symmetry. All things come back around.

Again and again, you wish you could forget like everyone else. Yes, you probably will forget to remember it. Everything, her, when you sleep and you are so sleepy, a pervasive exhaustion dribbles down from what you feel is your forehead, behind your eyes, in your skull, and it skulks down your spine. It would be so easy to just shut your eyes, disappear, and let go of this hell of consciousness. Or you could fight it for a little while longer, at least to know the truth and then sink into the frozen sea of temporary bliss. You won't even remember how far away you were or how close you came. If only you could leave yourself a message, a trace. Rising up costs dearly and delivers a moment of near fainting. You steady yourself with a hand on the rippling, glassy walls. They do not melt at your touch. What... do you see?

Your head is a hot iron that sweats the frosted walls and between the running tears it seems, a hollow. Saga had said... is there a way around? There will be. You press into the barrier. It cries out with

a satisfying *hisssh* and clouds of steam temporarily blind you. Pebbles drop, ice becomes sharp, splits, and crashes to the cavern floor. The water smoke wafts away, fleeing your cranial sun. And you see inside the Chamber of Artifacts.

Through a roughly cleared rectangular portal you enter an octagonal room of... petrified wood? Implicit recollections of trees and tree-flesh grow through the hellfire in your head. And above you an expansive root system dominates the ceiling, bursting out its primary knotty shoots from the center, below which is a chair. A throne? And... someone sitting there. You see only the back of the head.

"Hello?"

No answer.

Your eye-light inspection will have already given you away, unless they are blind or sleeping. To your left is a waist-high pillar of deep, rich brown and on top is a miniature, gnarled tree. So that is a tree. So small yet so strong to live away from the sun. There is worn writing on the side of the pillar. You can only make out the first word. "BURNING".

To your right an identical table with an object of metal on top and a wood plaque reading something ending with "COMPASS". The other walls also have other pillars and some are empty, others not. Seven walls, seven altars of artifacts, and the eighth is the opening you came through. Brom continues to the

middle of the room, to the seat, to the unmoving person there. Your stomach drops down further with each bootless step.

Beyond the throne you make out a stack of sixteen discs on a pole with sizes going from large to small, bottom to top, circular, thick like weights, with silver spacers in between. Between that and the throne but off to the sides, and so creating a diamond shape, are two more poles devoid of anything.

"Who are you?"

Still no answer. You are nearly upon him. On the opposite wall is a pillar, you can make out the word "MASK" and above it, the only writing on any of the walls, is...

At each passing of the sun a disc shall be moved. Always small to large. Never large to small. And when all is aligned, the two shall take the seat to become one. The stewards, then planted, become the seed to grow and return the frozen sea to green. Thus fulfills the Holocene Prophecy.

Fish knew and lied, or did he not remember everything? The entire destiny of this cursed race laid out in old wood using mere lines, hardly even a paragraph! What of the Youngest Dryas or Stargrazer? Was that invented to pad out the dogma of their dark days beneath the surface, hidden from the sun, trapped in the earth? Was this the only hope they had had to work with?

Movement! No, it was only you. Brom put his hand on the high back of the chair, seeing the top of the synth's head more clearly. Delicate four-fingered hands on the arm rests, head slightly to one side ... sparkling with encrusted gems of water, all blue prisms and droplets beneath your gaze. Hoarfrost, dead. Your heart, if you had one, creeps up as your stomach falls. Everything is falling apart. Brom steps around, sickening feeling, dread... knowledge.

It's her.

You touch her hands. The back of them feels cold, cold like skin, dead refrigerated skin. This is a morgue for one body, one synth, one woman, one love. You don't know how to pray. You try to gulp, but you have no throat. You want to weep, but you have no tears. And with no lids, you can't even close your eyes. The sight is unbearable. Her face is ... gone.

The front of the metal head is rent asunder, tendrils of steel reach for you from the gaping hole, only sticky cold blood and empty shell. What have we done? She was frozen in eternity with the immaculate beauty of her face stolen and defiled. What hope for salvation for anyone involved in this, witness to it, there is no escape from such pain.

It becomes clear, terribly clear. You, the father, lover, leader... jealous, ambitious; they said you wanted to be feared, different. But, oh how could you have been so ugly? Did you ever repent or was it masked by self-prophecy? Did you

give them a reason? Was it obvious, lusty vengeance? Do you regret?

No.

You don't now and you will never know if you did. If there was justice you would not have lived even to forget. Are you here because of mercy or tyranny?

She sits listless, staring at you. Big green eyes, longish brown hair, peach-colored skin, and a delicate chin pointing down to her folded hands. You try to smile and it falters. Fails because you don't have lips. But what is it she has? You were supposed to be happy. You weren't supposed to feel ashamed.

"I have to go."

"To work?"

"Where else? There is a city to construct."

"Where? I haven't seen it. Why can't I see it?"

"We're still planning it."

"You and him?"

"Who else? I need his help."

"Have fun."

"Thanks."

You're going.

She's watching.

"I think you've been avoiding me."

"When I'm done I can spend more time with you. I promise I'm not."

You know what's coming, "You'll never be done."

She was right.

"You are late." Saga chuckles wearily.

"I found her. The White Dryad." You say solemnly.

"Ah," he blinks. "Then you have that which everyone says you stole?"

"A corpse? I wouldn't take that. It looks like she's been sitting there for quite a while."

"Ah, sir, I'm sorry," He bows his head. "The White Dryad came from her... body. But that shell is not it, not her."

"Damn." Numb with heat and disappointment. "Did I kill her?"

He shakes his head, "No, sir. You made Sid do that."

You squeeze your eyes tight, the pressure of that guilt is mighty. It is not enough to keep you silent. "Why?"

"Your reasoning is only known to you."

"Then it is gone forever... What happened?"

"Sid absconded with the artifacts, but he loved her and thus you lured him back. You forced him to... kill her," he shudders and continues. "And carve it out." He inhales and exhales to steady himself.

"Why do you think I did it?"

"Ambition. You wanted to take more than her. There's just nothing else down here."

"And jealousy?"

"If that's the case, you hid it from us. Maybe you couldn't from her."

"Why didn't Sid leave after that?"

"You broke him, and with it his motivation."

"He tried to break me. He cut off an arm with that Sunblade."

Saga nods chuckling. "The only weapon we know that can harm us. Its use is forbidden, but here you are whole."

"Hmm, that's strange."

"It is, but why do you say that?"

"Serak slashed me open with halberd and Sid patched me up."

Saga frowns at your stitches, "I cannot fathom how he managed that."

"Which?"

"Either, really since we are immune to the damage of synth-smithed weaponry. And without a need for healing, we've never practiced it. You always disapproved of Sid's experimentation in that area."

"So he told me."

"Well, hmm, he managed it anyway but to what point and why do you have a scar? This has not happened before. I hope that means we're finally making progress."

"As long as I don't end up permanently amputated."

"Where did you leave the sword?"

"Near the temple."

"Then that is where it would be, or was...."

"Because everything resets." You confirm.

"Because Fish probably picked it up this time." He continues to clarify: "The artifacts exist outside of the loop, maybe even time itself which is why they never age, rot, die, whatever."

"And I need them?"

"I believe so."

"Then I'd better go."

He tilts his head in acknowledgement. "I think you're ready. I'd wish you luck but you don't need it. And saying that never helped you in the past."

"Thanks, Saga." You're already moving up the stairs to the tune of a disgruntled earth.

"You're welcome, sir," he says after you.

"I have a destiny."

"You have a responsibility to these people."

And to you, you think to yourself. "I know. I'm trying to balance both." You and me.

"There's only eight of us. It's not too much to ask is it? To keep us informed? To keep me informed."

"I will." You won't. "I promise." Liar.

Brom sets out to retrieve the artifacts. You form a tentative plan, an ordering within the narrow band of time you have to work with, fighting against the wooziness threatening to send you down to the ground, down underwater, into the blessed depths of forgetfulness. Which, really, is not much of a threat, more of a tantalizing offering that you reject with the resolution to finish this task. The solution is so simple, so close, how could it not be completed? Except no one still seems to know where the White Dryad went. First things first: the six-ball behind the waterfall.

Damn, it's not there. Why? How? Saga said that... well was it not an artifact? Wait a minute. It's snowing and Sheraga never delayed you, you never saw the figure on the bridge, you hadn't even looked up. Looking out, you see no face in the icefall. Curious. You briefly consider once again the upside down nature while trudging on, up, up. Your thighs drag, filled with lead, leaden joints. Every one of them grinds slowly, filled with sawdust and liquid mist. Dust in your head, these stairs take forever. It's no longer quiet. The buzzing between your eyes is a high-pitched insect ready to sting with pointy bits and black you out. In fact you could swear blood is pumping into whatever fills your cranium, throbbing with thousands of sucking, squirming, slithering leeches.

Here, the door with the flower. Where you left the winged harness and mask. The door creaks open, noise melding with the fizzing in your forehead. The static is the snow blowing into the corridor past

the empty room. Nothing is in there. You step inside as before and glance around. Frustration builds sharply, indignity at the unfairness and illogical nature of the situation. Or Saga lied, and if he didn't then Sid would come through that doorway as the angel of death. But he doesn't. The doorway and the room remain empty. Whatever sounds might provide clues are drowned in the mucky symphony of your machine head trampling the downward slope of heat exhaustion in a glacial crevasse. Hilarious. Thanks life. Well, there's only one place left: the temple.

On the way up, Brom opens the doors left and right, wandering down some hallways ignoring others, seemingly at random, and disregarding the screeching, old-iron racket they make revealing the rooms inside. Empty rooms. Rooms devoid of people and thinks, I mean things, pure function with no content, no data, potential without fulfillment, storage without object, any objects. Everything is empty. Everywhere you look is emptiness and yet for being a vacuum, it is fuel for the bonfire of your desperate frustration. There is no time and so much to do and your head knows but the path is unclear.

You want to explode.

The ever-increasing knowledge is contributing to the very prevention of fulfillment. Paradox. You cannot know everything you need to know or it gets in the way of doing it.

Behind the pictures, empty rooms.
Behind this strange axe, empty room.
Behind this shadowy devil with a pointed
tail, empty room. Behind this piano by a
well, empty room. Behind a city of
shapeless skyscrapers, empty room. Behind
a flood of fire, empty room. Behind...
whatever that thing is... a person with
antennas? Empty room. Teardrops, arrows,
pistols, suns, moons, flowers, all kinds
of things you'd find on a charm bracelet,
you find nothing behind them, and no one
has come upon you, and in this whole cold
city of Rimaye you have absolutely no
idea where to go to find what you need.

The blizzard caresses the bridge to
the temple and across it you think you
can make out a crimson glow. He must be
there, if nothing else. Fish will be
where you expect him. And he is.

"Where are you going with this?"

"After the end."

"Yes."

"It isn't a question. I will go past the end."

"And that is not here?"

"No, not here."

"Hmm." Your proclamation is small because they have long since failed to impress her. You go on night missions like an apparition. Does she know? And while you intend only good, it is really centered on yourself. No one can really understand, not her especially, and so you go it alone, keeping the explanations vague. You know that...

"Would you like to lie with me?"

Ah, it's been so long.

"Yes."

Did it sound enthusiastic enough? She falters the falsified smile with a frown, momentarily, and repairs the facade only as quickly. What was this now? What were we doing then? Every time you go back, every time you stay, it is only out of fear, and it is only because you're afraid to be alone. Not for loneliness sake but because it would mean all these moments have been, wasted, building to nothing. There must be a goal at the end of any path, mustn't there? Didn't you

intend to burn the ships of appetite that brought you to her shores and truly open your heart? Wasn't your heart open enough and it wasn't enough. Or was this hungry dissatisfaction borne of something else?

Your breath shall intermix, maybe for the last time, again.

"Ah, the prodigal father returns! Come to repent for your crimes against humanity, committed in your relentless pursuit of freedom."

"I've come for the artifacts, Fish. They must be returned to the chamber."

"Is that so? And what of the White Dryad?" He touches the altar. "Is that where you took her?"

"Yes, maybe. I don't know where she is, but the discs are aligned."

He guffaws with a raised eyebrow. "You expect me to believe that? We haven't moved a disc in decades." He turns as he talks, pointing out the temple decor. "There is a new destiny for us. Not the nonsense graffiti, nor some risky device."

"What device?"

"You must be joking."

"Then humor me. Tell me, I..."

"Am not in your right mind? Very well. Since you've come back to submit to me," he says with an air. "Then I'll explain what you already know or knew about the rings of Saturn releasing Neptune."

You grit your teeth. "Go on."

"Below the chamber is an even larger room of metal, glass, wires, and curving walls. Those disc rods connect to a power

core." His silky voice is plaintive and pretentious. "They are detonators. It is some sort of massive bomb." His hands grip an invisible sphere that explodes as he talks. "We would be unwittingly setting it off when the pattern is finished, blowing ourselves up, probably in revenge of our ancestors' inability to achieve what they were able to give us."

"And that is?"

"Immortality. Ever-lasting life." He savors the phrase, spreading his hands to the tune of it on his voice and examining your reaction.

"Now I say you must be joking."

He glares irritably. "Why?"

"It would be ridiculous to build us only to blow us up and, anyway, we are not alive. *This* is not life."

"Of course we are. You were so convinced of this that you conspired to save yours above all others. We are building Rimaye."

"A hollow city...."

"A city for the future, perfected now so it need never be rebuilt, only added to."

"You're crazy, where is everyone?"

"Everyone of us is accounted for and one day we will learn to propagate our species and that old version of the

prophecy, along with you, will be long forgotten."

"I'm sorry, old friend, but I am already forgotten to myself. And if I ever cared about any of this... I have forgotten that as well. All I see now is ruinous tombs and the end of a city. Not the beginning."

"I knew," he begins.

"You always did, or pretended...."

"I knew you were *selfish*...." he talks over you.

"You're not *listening*....". You talk over him.

"You and your selfish plans. I can't let you leave."

"There's no stopping me."

"Tell me where she is."

"The discs are aligned."

"*You lie!*" Guards appear behind you on the bridge. Brom laughs coldly; your brain is bubbling magma. You see only red.

"Watch." You turn.

"Don't you d...." *BOOM!*

You stride outside, onto the bridge, watching chunks of stone and ice rain down and out of the glacial ceiling and

hollow city.

"It doesn't..." BOOM! "work without..." BOOM! "How can..." BOOM! "...this be?" His voice is shrill and aghast. Your mind is seething, yet you watch unconcerned at the rattling devastation and the brothers who fall to the dark depths below.

"I don't know," you say. What a waste. Will this be your final cycle? Is this the last you won't remember?

"You won't get away with this!"

"None of us will get away from this, ever."

He approaches you sitting down on the bridge, dangling your feet over the edge. "Why, damn you! Why did you ruin all our plans? Our plans?"

"I told you I don't remember. And to be completely honest, I don't care. Because the reason is lost and there's no way to change it. Believe me."

"There's so much we don't know, so much I wanted to know," his voice now pleading, his mood is all over the map in these final moments. He sees his life, whatever it was, had been predicated on a perfection that was never possible. Yet he'd probably do it all the same way again, such was it so simple to write prophecy for those that give in to their aptitudes and talents, becoming mere tools for fate, which could see unlike justice. Yet was worse off for the lack of all other facilities. "I don't want to

fail." To make life about success is to see only error in the end.

You could comfort him. "Shut up." But your head is the only thing on your mind besides your immediate failure. It all seemed so simple once you knew what you were supposed to be doing.

"What's that?"

"I said...." You look up from the abyss.

"No, *that!*" He's pointing up and a blinding light is blazing down. Two lights, maybe more, squeezed out from behind a mask. Sky blues or cyan or aquamarine. The colored beams phase and shift excitedly, unable to settle.

Sid. He swoops down and lands somewhat awkwardly near you as you stand up. He's decked out in the artifacts: boots, wings, mask, and sword aflame again. How does it burn? No matter, he's brought everything but that blasted ball.

"What have you done, Brom?" His dry voice sounds... scared?

You laugh coldly. "Were you leaving, Sid?"

"Not without her."

Palpitations. "No one is leaving." You don't wait. They're distracted, and you dive into him knocking you both off, plunging into blackness that fades to white.

C6: LIQUID HERTZ

"I don't want you to go."

"I wish I could stay with you all day."

"But?"

"But I can't, I have to go."

"I know, I just don't like it."

"You have to let me."

"You want me to tell you to leave?"

"I've never been any good with goodbyes."

"Then we won't say it."

"Don't say anything?"

"Say you will see me soon."

"How soon?"

"Make something up. Surprise me."

"I'll be back in the blink of an eye."

She laughs merrily and clutches you close. "You're adorable."

I know I'll be leaving, but we all leave no matter what.

Oh, this is no good.

You've got to get out of here.

You groan. There is shooting pain in your head made of laser beams bouncing around within your brow, tearing off pieces of your brain, slicing it up into sizzling strips of synthetic gray matter. How could you have even considered sleeping? You wish you had a needle to jam into your skull and puncture this pressure. You pull yourself up, leaning weakly against the uneven cavern wall of ice. It seems to groan in response, rumbling deeply. You hit your forehead with the bottom of your palm. No relief. This isn't life. This is impossible! You bellow in frustration, it comes out smooth and synthesized, cleaned of the primal roughness when placed in the pipes of this manikin. Your voice is infuriating as anything else.

You're trapped, not just in this ice prison or this loop, but in a body you have no memory of, no love for, and only a passing use. If you could only finish this or just die or...

Anything is worth a try but you're finished trying to figure things out, to do the right thing, to follow a plan. Brom runs out of the cavern, leaving behind him that cursed Chamber of Artifacts and whatever it was that he was *supposed* to do.

"Oh." Saga says hardly looking up, "here we go again."

"I'm getting out of here."

"And I'm getting... too old for this shit," he chuckles but there is little mirth in it. His eyes are dim, hardly any lavender can be detected. They appear grayish, silver. The old man can hardly keep his eyes open.

"Don't try to stop me."

"I won't, it's not necessary...."

"No, please, no more...." You speed past him, up those stairs, ignoring the mallet beating against the inside of your head, ignoring all reasons, relishing in the simplicity of going, doing, anything, anywhere but here.

"There's no place I'd rather be."

"There's no one I'd rather see."

"You're so silly."

She pokes you. "I'm the silly one? Look at you, mister."

"All this looking..." You shake your head theatrically.

"What's wrong with that?"

"We should be playing, not looking."

I say fever.

You're drunk. The anger and exhaustion combine to form intoxication. Ascending the cursed stairs you bump into the walls, slip and bang your shin, and nearly topple backwards all the way back down. Yet you persevere with hateful haste and find your way to the top, into the usual coffin-shaped passage, and out into the city.

"I'm here!" Your voice seems groggy, forced.

Milky yellow light illuminates you as Sheraga approaches curiously. "Sir? I'm so glad we've found you." He utters it creepily but you don't care. You're too tired and upset to read into any subtleties anymore and soon won't it be all over anyway?

"Where are you going?" He shambles after you.

"I'm getting out of here, Sheraga. Tell your master that you can all go to hell."

"But, sir, aren't you the master?"

You laugh harshly, "And I am in hell."

"This must be heaven."

"Does that make us angels?"

"It makes you an angel. Just look at that face. The face of an angel."

"My face looks just like your face."

"Oh I don't think so. Why, if I were so beautiful..."

"You think I'm beautiful?"

"No." Closer. "I know you're beautiful."

"You are such a sweet idiot. That's only flattery."

"I know, but it's pretty great isn't it?" Silly smile.

"You are pretty great, my beautiful boy. If I am an angel then where are my wings."

"You know where, love."

You know exactly where those wings should be, assuming Saga knew what he was talking about. It hadn't worked out so great last cycle but that must have had to do with these pesky robots that could not decide whether they were friend or foe. You don't care. It's okay. I wouldn't either. See now you're starting to feel... a bit... mad, and I don't only mean angry. Brom's brain is baking and you are separating from it. Not long now before you're gone completely. And no, I don't mean dead. Don't worry, that's far off I'm sure. You're just not going to be in his head anymore and he will forget until someone else jumps in. Let's hope that he figures this puzzle out so he can get some peace.

"Sir?" Someone's tapping on your shoulder. You were out of your mind for a moment and forgot to keep walking. It isn't at all like breathing, that is, if you did that. You also forgot the weasel Sheraga whom, despite blindness, followed you here, a lap dog who is bound as much by curiosity as the gravity of your presence, and this time no frightful specter on a bridge above to drive him off.

"Aren't you going to tell Fish where I am, pup?"

"You won't stay here," he accuses whiningly.

Duh. Kodo drums in your cranium, burbling molten stuff, stabs of pain behind your eyes which see what you are looking for: the wings in a heap on top

of boots, mask, and a sword nearby pulsing strangely. You never really examined these things and you won't now but you hope their nature is second to you and using them will happen instinctually.

"What...? Are those the holy artifacts?" Sheraga squints and looks a bit wild.

"Help me put this on." You lift the wing set up and twist it around, stepping into the ribcage structure of belts, buckles, and titanium bones. No worse for wear. If time could not harm them then why would a fall? Were they always this way? You don't damn care! You can't because it'll all be over soon, again, and maybe this is worth a shot. It is, it must be. Not that you care.

"I just wanted you to know, I care a lot about you."

"Thank you, darling, but this is too much."

"I love you."

Silence.

Stares.

Swallowing your heart.

The wings by themselves do nothing to help you rise yet in combination with the fancy footwear, you are soon climbing out of this miserably cold pit of cruel circles.

"Goodbye you poor bastard," you shout down to Sheraga as you launch upwards at an angle towards the waterfall and incredibly have the traction to push off and up in the opposing upward direction, crossing winds. What did you hear him say? Something about knowing whom his father was. Yes, that's you, you suppose. You brought all of this about and now you're abandoning it.

You glide under a bridge and catch some kind of updraft that lifts you up on the other side. Tombs, that's all of this architecture. It irritates you to think of the time you spent on this wasteful building before you were being wasted by time. Is this your reward for that ambition? For having her killed in an abominable way? Your longing mingles with rage and shame, a useless soup of suffering. The wind does little to cool it and neither do the soft snowflakes muffle it. They disappear in hissing puffs at the slightest contact with your sweltering crown and they gather in your tailwind with nervous fright, lamenting the loss of all their unique brethren. It is not enough to destroy snow, to conquer wind, or potentially sacrifice yourself to selfish pity. Your lust demands blood and the innards of synths will have to do.

Brom swoops down as the angel of death, barreling unrestrained into Sid's

hallway, wings bent ever so slightly, sword pointed like a beak. You skid to a stop in those massive boots, which, now not intended for sneaking, make a deep scraping noise of friction. The little blizzard following rushes to catch up and overshoots with blistering hisses, pops, and a cloak of feathery white. Maybe he won't even be here.

The door with the pictured tree on fire groans open to reveal the son. The father slaying the son, both cursed men, is a minor treachery compared to the overbearing shadow of shameful crimes.

"Just like you, isn't it?" He says dryly. "Just like last time."

"And the time before, a hundred or a thousand times, who knows!"

"Cripes." His extrinsic voice is grating. "You've gone completely cracked, alright."

This good humor bullshit is not convincing. Not after what you've seen.

"What kind of man do you see?"

He's startled by the question and you are, too. Why haven't you struck him down? Do you want it to hurt more? Do you want him to beg?

"Strength that was brittle is easily broken. There must be strong roots first."

"And if it's too late to grow them?"

"It's, uh, never..."

"It is, you will see. So I am to die bad."

"I don't..."

"Whoever I was before, he is to blame for this predicament of whatever this life is and now I want to make him pay."

"And me?"

"I see weakness. You atrophied by doing nothing but holding on, toying with pointless curiosities for distraction from your own failure."

He gulps. "You would have preferred I kill you?"

"That was only one choice and you made none."

"And now you'll kill me?"

You consider it now. Will you slay this pitiful creature? You nod slowly. Yes.

"To put me out of my misery?"

"To feed mine." And I can't get enough.

"You make me so happy." Wanton
giddiness.

"Are you surprised?"

"A little. You're more than you let on.
Gentle yet ... surprising. A killer
combination."

"I'm glad." Tight embrace.

"This was a good idea."

"I have my moments."

"I'd like some more."

Those blubbering boys are at either end of the hall, halberds extended defensively, scared of the savagery they witnessed. You go through the one blocking the exit you came in from. By this I mean you walk into him as he rains blows, hacks and slashes, yet can do nothing to stop your advance and only barely slow you down. Their voices drift to you as if from far away through the oscillating *WHUM WHUUM* of your head. You break him down, precise strikes with the hilt, and then eviscerate him with a long, horrifying chop down the shoulder and clean through to the other side of his hip. Screams. Gurgles. Synthetic. Fake. Does nothing to slake the thirst. The attacks across your back cease, you spin reflexively in a wide arc and an arm amputates ugly at the elbow. You fly out and his screams are swallowed in the massive quiet of the chasm, towards the red eyes staring down at you, straining to hear if there was actually something to be heard.

Brom knocks Fish off the bridge without bothering a word or a pause. He is answered by a confused yelp that spirals out of earshot. If you had gotten caught up talking you'd lose all the answers and be consumed once again, maybe for the final time.

Up, up, and on up you go, jumping and flying, past the tower tops plain and flat, past that feed or floor of the upside-down waterfall, past the river tap draining back, past the narrowing of the stalactite-peppered roof of the city, and into the chasm chimney rift. Away, away, and away you squeeze and swear, smashing

ice chunks filled with black rocks, gray stone, and sparkling mineral chaff.

You're stuck.

You weep. There are no tears, no questions. You convulse in despair, stuck in steam and ice, stuck in a frozen cloud melting. You whimper in frustration and the synthesized tones are almost musical. Your voice gives over to this uninhibited.

You sing as only a synth can sing, as only one who has lost everything or wants to lose everything. You smell salty tears. Your skin shrinks from the icy embrace, and you taste both. You lick your lips and look at the Sunblade, your salvation. There is an odd strip of shiny black running up the blade from the cross of the hilt to the very tip, the single swiping edge. It doesn't end in a point. The cross is mounted with a bright spherical gem and attached to a dark leathery handle ending with a large silvery pearl pommel. It's odd, and beautiful, and it can save you. It can end all of this.

You sigh, pressing it to your face and shutting your eyes tightly. You are still singing. It is a sad song, a march up to the cliffs of doom, a song of giving up. Of suicide. The sword warbles with your voice and then an intense heat blooms before your opening eyes. You see bruised flames and a white hot core. Something clicks and a resounding reverberation emanates from a fiery blast down the length of the blade, carrying

away the fire through the roof of the world, gouging an escape route that burps gravel wetly.

You see stars, a wonder! Your lust turns to wonder. And more. The man Brom shoots out into the sky to behold the moon. And all around you see glittering flat and white in all directions. No paths, no formations, and no openings except the one you came through. There is nothing out beyond the limits of your small world. It's all just... white.

C7: POWER OF PLANTS

"I have to tell you. I want to give you my affection and my attention, but I can't be there for you...."

"That's okay, we'll just see where this goes."

"And if we fall in love?"

"Don't frighten me."

"You'd rather it go nowhere."

"This is somewhere now, isn't it?"

"Are you saying I should forget you?"

"You will forget me someday."

You remember.

You are Brom.

That is all.

There is nothing else within, nothing else without. Even that identity is empty, meaningless. All those dreams you followed without wondering their meanings, gone. Ignorance, gone. Caring or ignoring, gone. You stopped the fear and the rage, but it didn't save you. It bled out and left you with this. What is this? Brom, you, heave a heavy sigh from within a deep well of sweet sadness. Oh well. It won't be long and you'll return to baby-like bliss in a body not your own, aptitudes and mysteries, the future the past. Again and again. You failed. You cannot break the cycle, Saga said. It still hurts.

If you had fingertips they would scrape the rough walls as you clamor to rise. Never have you felt so heavy, leaden, filled with sand, carrying a great burden. Your flesh, if you had flesh, clammy and holding on by a thread, one more step and your flimsy form will crumble to dust. You can hear the silence from far away, rumblings in the deep, and it is an effortful relief to blink as though drawing blinds and yanking tightly tucked blankets around you.

If you had a neck, you turn it and your body to look blurrily through the glassy walls into the Chamber beyond, to her. The walls sweat, drip, and disappear into watery smoke but you do not step

through. You raise your hand but then let
it drop to your side. Breathe in. Exhale.
It would feel good. It would feel real.
But it is not and you cannot breathe.

When did she let you caress her? The barriers that seemed infinite now suddenly were never there and this embrace is natural. It feels so right.

"It's alright." She hums against your cheek.

"I don't know what the rules are." You breathe.

"There are no rules." Hands on the back of your neck, tingling.

"I don't know what I can do." You breathe.

"To me." She is hot against you.

You nod, intoxicated. You breathe.

"Anything."

"Saga?"

"Ah," wan smile, deeply saddening.
"So you remember still."

"Barely." You choke on it.

He nods sagely, melancholy.

"Why did I break your legs?"

"I tried to stop you," he shrugs.

"From activating the device." You
can't say bomb. Do you believe it?

He shakes his head no. "That's why we
came down here. But something changed
your mind and, stealing the artifacts,
you charged out. I got in your way."

"I'm sorry." You hang this head
filled with cotton and disappointment.

"Bah, don't be. It's not your fault."
His head wobbles. "Actually," he adds.
"It is your fault but I'm so far past
blaming you. We, all of us, conspired to
this point. I forgive you if you will
forgive me, too."

"Of course."

He nods wearily, more of the bobbing
of a ship on the ocean than any conscious
action.

"The artifacts are gone."

He closes his eyes. "Irretrievable?"

"Above the ice."

He opens them again to peer at you,
"You got them back before."

"How?"

"No idea. You weren't always the easiest person to get explanations out of."

"And you were?"

He chuckles softly, "Point taken."

"How can you take this so well? I feel so sad."

"I'll feel sad again. These feelings we have, they go in cycles too." He yawns, stretching his wrinkles smooth, mouth a funnel for the sleepy sound. "I will sleep soon."

"And me?"

"You will too and forget all of this. The confusion, disappointment, anger, sadness... even love. Sometimes I envy you for that."

"How can I love her? She's dead and I have no memories."

"You feel it anyway."

He watches you. You stare at him.

How much has he heard you say, repeat. How much is there to really know?
"The... feeling, it's connected to some-

thing indistinct. All of my memories were candles that burned to puddles. Maybe, I can rebuild them."

"Doubtful and it would make you crazy besides."

"I am crazy."

"No." Chuckles. "You're just more human than you think." Yawn. "And I, shall see you in the morning." He leans his head back against the wall, eye-lights going dim, mist thinning.

"Goodnight, Saga."

"Goodbye Brom." He murmurs with a mite of mirth.

This stirs something in your mind but his lights flick out before you can ask anything. It's too late now anyway. You might as well climb those stairs one last time.

"I can't sleep." Tense.

"Me, either." Here, now.

Lightning quiet.

"I think I know the reason...." Just words.

"Yes?" Heavy anticipation.

"You." It all unravels.

"Who's there?" You're almost fond of his predictability.

"What have you got there, Sheraga?"

"Brom, sir! I, uh, I shouldn't but..."

"It's the mask."

"Yes, the Mask of Meb, that's right, sir. I was just..."

"Returning it to the chamber."

"But that's impossible, sir."

"Go see for yourself."

"If you want me to, sir." He says uncertainly.

"I *command* it."

He starts visibly and straightens, nods his head jerkily in salute and goes into the passage you came from. You look up and wave as a figure appears on a bridge above, looking down at you.

"Hello, Sid," you whisper. The figure hurries on. Brom enters the first tower, the first room, the first floor, full of statues, people watching you carefully, but they only care because you do. Why carve statues of history or prophecy except to stave off the madness of an age without meaning, drawing a line in the sands of time. What was this art, ambition for immortality or a relieving expression?

You mount the stairs carefully, a feather travelling upwind, jostled by your own momentum as terribly sluggish as it seems. Up again, always up from the start and no matter how high, getting knocked down. You come upon and pass the first bridge. It begins to snow and you can't hear its delicate bid on the acoustics. Up further to another bridge, crossing above the chasm floor by your meeting with Sheraga. Sid is there, looking abashed, guilty, standing on the bridge between you and a cavern compartment on the other side.

"Well, alright. I see I'm the one who found you." He strains to sound amiable, though of course it is nearly monotone. Does he think he is the only one who can see our true expressions, our real faces, or at least the mask underneath the mask?

"She was here," you tilt your head to that room. "Your little secret cave?"

He splutters. "What? The White Dryad is in the temple...."

"Until you took her away."

"Why would...." You cut him off by raising a commanding hand.

"Be quiet, Sid." Everything is noise.

You approach him and he quails then puffs up. "You didn't deserve her. She didn't deserve this."

"After all this time, you cannot let go?"

"I'll never forgive you."

"I know, because you are obsessed."

"Because I want justice!"

"You want me punished. Well, that has happened many, many times over. But it would never be enough for you."

"You think I care? I loved her. We all loved her, and what you did was unforgivable."

"And what you did?"

"I had no choice! You made me!"

"If you actually believed that, maybe you could forgive. The past is gone. She is gone."

"I hate you!" It snows harder.

"I'm sorry." Wind threatens you both, howling.

"Where is she. What have you done?"

"She is and always will be in the chamber. Go on. It's opened now."

He glares yet rushes past you.

"I thought you had other plans."

"Plans change."

"Or you abandoned them."

"Mm, I can neither confirm nor deny. I wanted to do this anyway."

"Sure, now you're going to tell me I had nothing to do with this."

"Why no, nothing at all."

"You didn't come for me?"

"No, I wasn't searching. You just happened to be where I went."

"Here."

"Yes, you just happened to be here."

"A lot just happens to happen around you."

You didn't stay in his little shrine long. There isn't long to stay anywhere anyway. Serik and Serak walk before and after you. Your escort walks briskly, anxiously, and you have trouble keeping pace. It seems you are swimming through murk, a very difficult task with a body of metal. Their voices hardly register more than bubbles or trickling sediment.

"I don't trust him," Serak grumbles. "He's playing us for fools with this humble act."

"He can barely stand up," Serik placates, warbling pitch, trying to sound confident.

"Don't make me laugh. I could do that."

"Well then maybe you could shut up."

"What!"

"At least he's quiet, and come on, look at that cloud he's packing."

"Yeah, looks like his head is going to explode."

"See?"

"Okay, whatever, I still don't trust him."

You feel a halberd poke you threateningly in the back. You stumble out onto the bridge. No more.

"I'm sorry, boys." You crumple to the

ground.

"BROM!" Hands grip your shoulders, turn you off your belly, and face you up to the absence of sky. Red light fills your vision. "What a mess. I knew you'd come crawling back. I didn't know we'd have to carry you." Fish knew, he always did, knowing stuff was what he always wanted. You wanted more.

"It's... late," whirring in your head, slurring words.

"Nevermind that, you'll sleep through dawn."

If there is such a thing, have you ever seen it? Have they? You laugh, hardly audible. A baby in all those arms, those hands. A feverish baby. Everything is gray and white.

"Brom, hey, not yet..." voices from somewhere far away and long ago becoming unrecognizable. Oh no...

"I try but I can't. I try so hard but I don't know how. I don't know what to do." Rambling. Is that you rambling? What are you saying? You try to listen closer. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?"

"Can you forgive me?"

"I would."

"You won't."

"No, you never needed us and you don't need my approval now. We'll talk in the morning."

BOOM! Waves crash in.

BOOM! Guttural thundering in the earth's ice cold voice box.

BOOM! Softly coming to take you.

BOOM! I can't wait for... the... fade...

C8: SHAMANIC

"That was a lot of fun, thank you."

"You're welcome, I quite enjoyed myself too."

"Well, I'd better go."

"Okay. Hey, let's do this again sometime."

"I'd love to."

You'd love, too.

You are awake.

Brom wakes up.

At first he doesn't move, then he turns his head left then right. He coughs, when it comes out a tone, he speaks. "Is this my voice?" He stands in one smooth motion. "It sounds, strange to me. And it's so cold." He tries to sniff, but he has no nose. "I think it even, smells cold." He looks at his hand. "Has it always been this way?" Where he sees, there is cobalt blue light. Where he doesn't there is only darkness. The entire world exists for a moment in front of him and then disappears when he turns his back on it. Another world, a version of it, a vestige, beckons from an opening in the ice on the dark side but he cannot hear it. Can he? What is he doing, touching the scar? Something he has not lost.

"It's warm here," he presses it with his palm. It is of no consequence that he has only four fingers to the hand. He is using only the palm. It's too low to be his heart and tin men don't have hearts anyway. Yet he feels it as his heart even though it does not beat. He senses it because it is her, inside of him, the White Dryad. The only barrier between his love and himself *is* his self. She was his burden and his boon. Brom cocks his head as if to listen yet he has no ears. He does not move from this spot as he always has. Yet it is not inertia. His motivation is redirected inward, seeking down into himself, into the two as one. She whispers in the rumblings of the deep, the stomach of the earth, ice and

stone, his light, her heart. She didn't take you back and you couldn't bring her back. Yet her memory was given to you. A priceless gift, and a priceless forgiveness.

Why? In any moment we can choose without regards to anything in particular. We can forget the past or ignore it. Same with our feelings or the evidence or morals, ethics, justice, the whole line of rationality and stacks of emotion may be left out from a single decision. Usually this comes to nothing. Some things are inevitable. Other times, well, they are the flapping butterfly wings, pivotal moments that we ourselves take no notice of.

Why? The bombastic moments of action are beyond the actual instant of choice. Perhaps the reconciliation of fate and freewill is that one begets the other and I'll let you decide for yourself which is the first and which is the last.

Brom is not where we left him. He is not where he began. He is following her call, though he does not know her, and he has no memories yet unmelted. He had to remember that he entered here through a dream. He passed into a woman's eyes, never to return, so close to something better left unknown. Curiosity has its consequences.

Brom sees her. He gulps. Tears gather in a pool under non-existent lids. He knows it's her sitting there. He doesn't gaze around, he doesn't read the prophecy. He only moves for her, to her,

and comes around to face her.

She is so beautiful, an angelic face. He touches the mask, her smooth skin. Somewhere it starts to snow. Deep down he knows that she is not asleep, and he doesn't suppress it. He lets it weave around the lump in his non-existent throat. He gathers her up to him in a tight embrace.

"I'm sorry," he whispers to her non-existent ears. Her hair smells of smoke and leaves. He breathes in the scent with non-existent nose. "I'm so sorry, my love." He kisses her ear gently as he speaks.

A pole to his right shoots into the ground with a resounding *BOOM!* He doesn't hear it or the one to his left. *BOOM!* He sits down cradling her. *BOOM!* The last pole vanishes. *BOOM!* So does he.

Now I'll never fall asleep. "Good morning." I think I'm falling in love with you.

"Goodbye." She was passing by.

That wasn't a very good start. Maybe it will make a better ending.

THE END

ABOUT

This started as my 2013 November novel project in Seattle and was finished December 1st at Massolit Books in Kraków.

However, Metrosynth originated as a video game concept at the end of 2009. I was inspired by some text-to-speech software that I coerced into a few simple sentences: "Is this my voice? It sounds strange to me. It's so cold, has it always been this way?" Massive changes in my personal life conspired to prevent the completion of the game. Indeed I barely started, but I was happy to find it again as a novella.

I am immensely grateful to Kathleen Turner for patiently editing my poetic prose and chaotic punctuation! Further credit goes to Leonardo Ariza for the gorgeous and cavernous front cover art (leonardoariza.wix.com), Eber Alegria for the cool and steely title graphic (behance.net/EberAlegria), and Albert Holaso for the haunting synth-in-tunnel illustration (holaso.deviantart.com).

I hope you have unanswered questions. You'll find the answers revealed in future books.